

Outback Odyssey 2012 - Part 1

Graham and Chris on tour - 2012 Part 1

One years sabbatical then on the road again.

Well we once again find ourselves meandering around the outback of Australia. In 2011 we sold our much loved Kimberley Kamper and purchased an Australian Off Road Camper's, Quantum "Super Camper". Now there are those of you who will scoff at us touring in such comfort and luxury. Well I guess we figured we had done a few years of austere travel and it was time to have such luxuries as hot and cold running water, a diesel space heater and shower and toilet. Cooking is still outside but why would you want the smell of cooking in your bedroom in any case. So 2011 consisted of going to Sydney in late May for the birth of a grandson, to Canberra in late June for the berth of a granddaughter and then continuing up to Caloundra to pick up our new camper on the 6th July. We spent the rest of July getting home, ample time to put our exciting new acquisition through its paces. Both Chris and I had job offers that would see us through the rest of 2011 and up to late June 2012. So we subsequently set off on this current outback "odyssey" on the 24th June. To call this adventure an "odyssey" seems to me more apt with the fact that there was really no plan other than to visit communities and small towns in the NSW and QLD outback with a few National Parks thrown in for good measure. So no stunning geographical features or breathtaking landscapes. Instead we have focused on communities, small towns, some history, and a sprinkling of outback pubs.

Our first night out was at Gunbower Island on the Murray river and the next morning we headed into Cohuna for morning tea with our friends, Geoff and Gael. Geoff complained that each time I visited, it ended up being very tough on his bank balance. Our previous visit ended in him buying a new camera and a quite expensive lens for



Black Shouldered Kite

taking bird photos. So this time, Gael was quite taken with our new camper. Geoff is of the tent and roughing it mould and Gael seem to like the idea of the toilet and shower on board. Geoff retires this year and they seem keen to do some outback touring.

So we will wait and see who holds sway. Needless to say I think the bank account is going to get a hit.



Camped on the Murrumbidgee

Our first duties after leaving Cohuna was to reach Canberra by about the 27th June to help Amanda (our daughter) and her family exit her house in readiness for the families 3 year stint in Dubai. So we had some time up our sleeves and decided to follow the Murrumbidgee as far as we could on our way to Canberra. So after two nights camped on the banks of the Murrumbidgee we arrived in Canberra on the 27th.

From Canberra we had further family duties in Sydney, helping Damian look after the kids while Tash, her sister and niece had a girls holiday in Malaysia. We stayed in Sydney until the 18th July then headed for Mudgee. At last we were on our way with our family obligations firmly behind us (for a while at least).

The Great Dividing Range

We were keen on heading directly north towards Mudgee and we decided to seek out the Turon NP, not far north of Lithgow, and after a rather steep winding track, we ended up in a private camp ground called Turon

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Gates. The property was deep in a valley about 25km from the highway but still in the Great Dividing Range. My Hema GPS indicated that we would be able to use the same track to get through to Sofala, a town that we wished to revisit from previous tours. The owner at Turon Gate (we never did get a handle on his name, either German or Dutch and very unusual,) advised that we could certainly drive to Sofala with difficulty but we should



not attempt it with the camper. You can never always trust this sort of advise but we took him at his word. The problem was that Chris was frightened that we would not be able to climb out of Turon Gate the way that we had come in, as it was extremely steep with many sharp bends. The Turon Gate guy said that it was a very picturesque track and

Sofala - Unfortunately this lovely old town appears to be deteriorating rapidly from lack of funds to save the historic buildings and the residents are far from wealthy.

worth the effort in negotiating the difficult sections. So despite the high cost of camping (\$40 per night - which doesn't include power, just toilets and showers - needless to say we were the only campers) we decided to spend the following

day driving to Sofala, then on to Hill End (an historic mining town) and back to Turon Gate to camp another night. Staying at Turon Gate in our old camper would not have been an option as the overnight temperature got down to a chilly -8.0°C. The



Hill End - a seeming time warp

puddles around the campground were frozen solid and my morning glass of water froze to a solid block of ice after being released from the pressurized water system in the camper. The diesel space heater was able to keep us inside at a cozy 22 Deg.

After doing the round trip back to Turon Gate, some 120km, we concluded that Hill End demanded further attention. So the following morning we broke camp and set off to Hill End. Christine's disquiet at the climb out of Turon Gate was a non issue, although I did engage low range before we started up the worst incline just to be safe. The camper with a full load of water (260Litres) grosses at about 2.1 tonnes and is therefore somewhat of an anchor to tow up steep mountain tracks. In Hill End we camped at the Village Camp Ground which we had to ourselves. It was quite an expensive stay as Christine lost her prescription sunglasses, the third bloody pair in 12 Months! The entire town of Hill End now comes under some kind of heritage arrangement and the residents are required to do all maintenance and modifications to their residences to protect the historic significance of the town. This is administered by NSW Parks and Wildlife.

From Hill End we proceeded to Mudgee where we did our first major shopping for supplies for our trip then headed to one of our favourite spots, Goulburn River National Park. It was still mighty cold (-7.0) in the mornings but sensational sunny crisp days. We stayed in this wonderful park for 4 nights and saw only one other vehicle that stayed in the alternate camp ground to ours. While there are no official bush walks we did some wonderful walks up and down the Goulburn river. This is our third visit to this park and will certainly no be our last. Why more people do not frequent the park is a quandry, surely it is not the rather long and twisting (but not difficult) track in of about 25 Km. On the morning of the 25th we headed for Gulgong, a distance of about 80 km, as we wanted to revisit this very quaint town that we had briefly visited in 2009. To get to Gulgong you have to



drive through the Ulan Coal Fields which is quite an experience in itself. It brings a sense of reality to the news reports of the land owners being up in arms over the mining companies prospecting and pegging mining leases on pastoral land. We set up camp in the local show grounds at Gulgong. Now Gulgong really is a unique town,



Goulburn River National Park



Unique town of Gulgong

and many of the miners from Ulan coal mines choose to live there. This is very evident by the sign in the Laundromat that defines which machines are only to be used for miners clothes. Walking the narrow streets of Gulgong you would not be surprised to see a horse and cart trotting down the thoroughfare. It really does have a sense of history about it. All of the buildings are wonderfully maintained and restored. The museum was incredible and covered several acres containing priceless memorabilia.

Western Plains



Chris feeding the Giraffes at the Dubbo Zoo

On the morning of the 26th we drove to Dubbo, determined to this time, to check out the Dubbo Western Plains Zoo. In other years as we have headed out from Sydney and gone through Dubbo we have always promised ourselves to make time for the Dubbo Zoo. So the following day was spent riding around the zoo on hired bikes followed by an early morning walking tour the next morning. The Dubbo Zoo, while very well presented and beautifully maintained, was a little disappointing due to a very severe lack of animals, there being many empty displays with notices advising that the animals were "off display". I guess they (Zoo Management) know what they are doing but it was certainly not what we had expected. This was also a common comment from fellow travel-

ers in our caravan park.

After a very cold early morning walk at the zoo which took us to areas of the zoo un-accessible during normal hours, we headed for Nyngan where we camped on the Bogan River in the Riverside Camp Ground. Fabulous



Many fabulous old pubs in the bush - this example is the small town of Trangie on the road between Dubbo and Nyngan

spot. There was a local event happening in the park, somewhat of a celebration with country and western music, cowboy hats and RM Williams "Sunday Best" attire. It appears that they were probably all off the land and had come to town to celebrate somebody's birthday. Many of them appeared to be staying in the on Site cabins so obviously not folk from the grand metropolis of Nyngan. Blow me down if later in the day



Chopper Landing Near our camp in Nyngan

we don't hear the sounds of a chopper close by. The bloody thing landed fair and square in the middle of the camp ground amongst the gum trees. The lad who was the focus of the celebrations and his folks were taken for a 20 minute joy ride in the Heli and returned safe and sound to continue their celebrations. It would be interesting to know which Air Traffic Controller gave permission for that little event. Only in the bush! It's good to see

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the Nanny State is being held at bay in some parts of the country.

Bourke And Beyond (Back o' Bourke)



Every business/shop have vandal proof hoardings in Bourke - no trading on Sundays

Late morning of the 29th July we headed for Bourke along the Mitchell Hwy and set up camp in the Kidman Tourist Park in "Northy" (North Bourke). Unfortunately no phone coverage here but we were intending to do some food shopping in Bourke so could do our Phone/Internet duties in town. We arrived in Bourke on a Sunday and nothing much had changed from our previous visit here in 2008. The town apparently has 55 Policemen for a population of 1500. We went to the Bakery for a coffee and that was one thing that had changed. It was terrible. When we were last in Burke there was an honest to goodness barista who had escaped out of the Cappuccino Curtain around Sydney but no more. They do still roast their own beans but they could have used pre ground coffee from the IGA and had as good a result.

Next day we moved camp to Mays bend about 15 km out of Burke on the Darling River. Had drinks and fireside chat that evening with some people in a couple of Bushtacker Caravans. One of the guys, Peter, had caught plenty of Yabbies and taught Chris how to process them for cooking. Thankfully we did not have too long to wait before putting the learning to good use. The next day Peter's mate left and as we started to pack Peter laid claim to our camp spot as his was being threatened by the rising river which was apparently due to keep rising for some time.



Have been trying for some good pics of Red Tailed Black Cockatoos for some time so was pleased when I snapped these on the main road just north of Bourke

We headed NE towards Hungerford and Currawinya National Park. About 100km short of Hungerford we were looking for somewhere to camp (mind you we had only travelled about 120km but in no hurry). We decided to check out Comeroo station which promotes itself as a "Station Stay". Comeroo is run by Bruce and Christine Sharp who promote their station as a Camel

Farm. In reality the station is a sheep station that stocks only sheep that are for meat production. By the standards of stations further north, Comeroo was relatively small being only 70,000 acres. In addition to sheep, they enjoy a sizeable income from feral goats, much to our surprise. The goats are mustered and sent to be slaughtered to produce halal meat for export to the Middle East. It seems that a lot of the sheep and cattle stations would have had trouble surviving over the recent difficult times if it were not for the income derived from feral goats. They average about \$20 to \$30 a head, the Billy's are sold by the kilo and the Nanny's per head. They take no caring for and simply need to be mustered and transported to the abattoir. Also they breed like rabbits so there is always a plentiful supply. In addition they tend to eat food that the sheep reject.

We had arrived during the middle of the day and were settling in to a pleasant afternoon at our camp on the banks of the Cuttaburra River which was very near the Homestead in the allotted camping area. Along comes Bruce to pass the time of day and seemingly chat about all and sundry. He enquired how long we thought we

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would stay, to which we replied just the one night. He suggested that we should go for a drive in the afternoon



Our camp at Comeroo



Sunset at Comeroo

and have a look around, particularly the lake (he spied my camera), "There's plenty of birds down there at the lake" says he. "While you are down at the lake why don't you go another couple of Km to the Artesian Spa we have got set up at the bore," he suggests. "Oh and by the way if you have a mind, you can camp wherever you like on the property." We chatted about this and that for a while and as he was leaving he says, "Christine is a very good cook and we are having roast tonight if you are interested but you better let me know soon as she needs to know how many she is cooking for". Chris and I looked at each other and both nodded.

So after lunch we set off for a drive to the lake and took our bath soap and towels to have a hot artesian spa if it was inviting enough. We were so delighted with both the lake and the spa that that night we told Bruce we would probably be staying another 3 nights at the least and that we would camp on the lake. When reflecting on the earlier conversation with Bruce at our camp I said to Chris, "That was a sensational bit of marketing".

In addition to ourselves at dinner were another couple (campers who had arrived late in the day) and Vereena, a



Our open air bathroom each afternoon - water a natural 46° C.



Just part of Bruce's museum of traps and other memorabilia.

German backpacker who was employed as a station hand. Now Vereena did not agree that 70,000 acres was small, because as she claimed, her home village and the one down the road in Germany, would have both fitted into Comeroo Station together. It was quite an entertaining evening and the after dinner chat with Bruce's dry sense of humour and "one liners" helped us forget the freezing cold as we dined outside in the "Camp Kitchen". We also discovered that the best watch dogs in fact were not canines but noisy Corellas. Nearing the completion of our meal, dessert courtesy of Vereena, who cooked a sensational pudding, we suddenly heard a screech from the large birdcage adjacent to the camp kitchen, "Car Coming", "Car Coming" and then some minutes latter the dogs at last heard the car coming up the front drive some 4 or 5 km away. Apparently the birds always announce the arrival of visitors after dark before the dogs become aware and start barking. The visitors were a couple of blokes up from SA who new the Sharps and had stayed there previously. Simply looking for a chat, a



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beer and somewhere to bunk down for the night.

Comeroo is marketed as "The Camel Farm". When asked about his camels Bruce said the reason he has the camels is that he had always been told how terrible camels were to break in and train. This was too much of a challenge to resist, so off he went out into the desert and got himself some camels and subsequently domesticated them.

On the morning that we left Comeroo we visited the homestead to settle our bill to find that the only one around was Vereena. Bruce and Christine had apparently flown the 100 km to Hungerford (population 15) the previous afternoon to have a Hamburger at the pub for dinner. When I asked when they would be back, Vereena pointed skyward. We could here the faint sound of a light aircraft approaching. So we sat down and waited for them to arrive and subsequently stayed for a cuppa and a chat. During our chat we where asked if we would ever be interested in caretaking during the winter months so they could take holidays. We said we would love too. Bruce also showed us around his pride and joy. His wonderfully presented museum of "Traps". Rabbit traps, Man Traps, Dingo Traps etc etc. The collection is apparently very valuable with some old rabbit traps often be-



Camped in Currawinya NP



Camped on the Warrego - Cunnamulla



The Warrego - Dusk

ing worth more than \$2000. He travels the country going to swap meets to add to his collection. Late morning we said our good buys and set off for Hungerford. It was now the 4th August.

Arrived and Hungerford, topped up with fuel (\$1.80/L) and had lunch at the Pub then went to Currawinya NP,



Cunnamulla Main Street - home of "The Cunnamulla Fella"



Cutting through the BS in Cunnamulla

about 20km up the road. Great spot on a water hole associated with the Paroo River in the southern end of the park. Drove out to the The Granites that afternoon and the next day did the drive out to lakes Numalla and Wyara, fresh and salt respectively. Spent two nights here then head to another camp spot on the Paroo River in the northern end of the park where we spent another 2 nights.

On the 8th we headed to Cunnamulla via Eulo. We set up camp on the Warrego River in a new Caravan Park just to the south of town. Following the advise of a fellow traveller who we talked to in Currawinya, we asked for a non powered site. What a great decision. All the caravans in the powered sites were packed in like sardines in



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a very regimented fashion while we had a riverside spot with the ability to have a fire and pretty much set up wherever we wished. We did the shopping and caught up with emails. We had made a decision to go to the Cunnamulla races the following Saturday (it was now Wednesday) and we did not want to stay in a caravan park so the next morning we head out to Charlotte Plains station about 50km east of Cunnamulla.

We were so taken with our stay at Comeroo we decided that Station Stays needed more investigation. When we arrived at the homestead (actually it was hard to identify which building was actually the homestead) we could not find a sole to speak to despite have rung the previous afternoon to advise that we are coming. We must have walked around for a good 20 minutes, calling out, knocking on doors, all to no avail. There were plenty of signs of life, vehicles, washing on the line, sprinklers going on the lawn but nobody. Eventually we did get some at-



Hot water bath at our front door - Charlotte Plains



The Bore Head - Charlotte Plains

tention and received instructions on how to get to a bush camping area on the main bore. So we set up camp on a bore drain near the bore and had a hot bath running by our front door. The artesian bores and their related bore drains have been at the heart of opening up much of the outback in Australia. Once a decent bore is established, the water that is at great pressure in the Great Artesian Basin, rises to the surface and provides an endless supply of water to the station which is distributed around the station via a network of bore drains. The rate of flow of the bores over the last 70 years has gradually reduced and subsequently to preserve this wondrous resource a programme has been set up to cap all the artesian bores in Australia. The bore water will now need to be distributed via pipeline around the stations, supplying water to troughs for watering the stock. Charlotte Plains has about 120 km of bore drains that will eventually become obsolete.

After our predetermined two nights at Charlotte Plains we headed back to the Caravan Park in Cunnamulla and were able to lay claim to our previous spot on the Warrego River. That afternoon we got dressed in our Sunday best and set off for the races. We had a great day. Met and made friends with the Michael, the local journalist for



Stephen checks the form guide- see text



The betting ring and track - Cunnamulla Races



the "Warrego Watchman" who was a young bloke from Melbourne cutting his teeth working for an outback newspaper. We also ran into a bunch of people who were photographic enthusiasts from a Brisbane Photographic club who were staying at a Station turned Private Nature reserve called Bowra about 20km out of Cunnamulla. We also chatted with a cocky, Stephen, who had connections to New Ireland (a New



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Guinea province) where we have spent some time with Damian, Natasha (wife) and family. We did contribute a little to the bar trade also and Chris had a flutter on the horses.

The next day we headed for Bowra Station only about 20km out of Cunnamulla, as mentioned previously, a privately owned wild life sanctuary (mainly birds)

that is run and staffed by volunteers. We had booked in for two nights (they limit numbers so booking is essential) so after setting up camp we did a tour of the property to get our bearings and while doing so tried our hand at bird identification. We both agree that we are pretty hopeless, particularly the smaller less easy to identify birds. When you check in you are supplied with a booklet to record the species and number sighted. Each evening at 6 PM they conduct a "Bird Call". It's like a bidding war, to see who saw the most number in one place of a particular species. It was very friendly but none the less quite competitive. All the different species that are seen are duly recorded and the data filed for future refer-



Brolga feeding on a Yabbie from an old bore drain

ence. To what end I have no idea, as in our opinion we have seen many more birds in other areas that we have visited. I don't think we will make bird watching more than a passing interest. At the end of the "bird call" we were advised that we had collectively identified 109 different species. We were also given an update on other matters by a volunteer environmentalist who administers baiting for foxes and pigs and to some extent feral cats. The feral cat is in plague proportions. (Do the environment a favour and turn your cat into a hat). According to him, whenever there is a move to have cats declared as a pest by the authorities the cat lobby are up in arms and the authorities/government back off, and so feline specific control, while available, is unable to be undertaken. Meanwhile the cats are decimating our wild life, make no mistake. In Currawinya we observed a Great Egret being dragged into the bush from the waters edge by a cat. They are more brazen than we have ever previously observed. They are a disgusting animal. In Currawinya there is a programme being undertaken to re-stock the park with Bilbies. They are being raised in an enclosure and considerable effort has been put into their health and welfare prior to being released into the wild. Shortly after we were in Currawinya we received a report in the local press that cats had got into the Bilby enclosure and decimated 75 % of the animals!!!

We set off from Bowra on the 14th August headed for the opal mining town of Yowah. This required us to once more pass through the small town of Eulo. Here Christine started chatting to a property owner (pastoralist) who was part owner of the new general store in Eulo. He was keen to get our opinion on the potential for tourists to camp on his property. It was on our way, so Chris said we would go have a look, camp there maybe and let him know our thoughts. According to him there was phone coverage at the property if you have a high gain aerial (as we do). Well after following Chris' interpretation of his instruction, both of which turned out to be hopeless, we ended up doing about 100km of useless searching before we eventually gave up. Once we reached Yowah we rang him and received a better version of the instructions, but



Old FJ ute in front of the Eulo Pub worthy subject matter for a photo.

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now it was too late as we were definitely not going back. Oh well, perhaps next time.

In Yowah we set up in the free camping area in the town and had a look around. I know I have used the term before but Yowah is a very unique town. One excellent quality is that cats are shot on sight. Irrelevant of being a pet or feral, they are simply not allowed to exist in the town - totally banned. Yowah is an exceedingly friendly place. The Caravan Park office/store is virtually the centre of the town. It's not everyday you see "Brighton Beach Huts" in the outback but they exist here. They house private hot artesian spa rooms that you can use free of charge. It makes no difference if you are a paying customer of the caravan park or you are camped in the free camping area that provides toilets and hot showers for a small donation to the Royal Flying Doctor. We visited the community information office and started chatting to the incredibly helpful and articulate guy who was in attendance. He advised us where to go fossicking for opals and provided us with a lot of history and info on Yowah. Our friend Michael, the journalist in Cunnamulla had advised us to eke out a guy in Yowah by the name of Eddy McGuire, the real Eddy McGuire. So we asked the guy in the info office if he new him and "That's me"



Open Air Hot Artesian Spas



Locals ready to welcome the Variety Bash

was the reply. Well after chatting for some time I showed him a copy of my book to have a gander through. We said we will leave it with him and pick it up later that day. He replied that as he was knocking off in an hour or so why don't you come around home for a "cuppa" tea and he would show us what he gets up to. So after lunch at our camp we headed for Eddy's place which was a wonderful oasis in the bush. He is an artist with a wonderful



The Joker comes to town



The lion sleeps tonight

collection of pieces that he and his ex wife have put together aver their 20 years in Yowah. We filled in the afternoon with ease. Great guy and as far removed from his name sake as you could possibly imagine. To their credit, him and his ex wife are still on excellent terms and the art collection is still named after him and his wife.

During the morning of the same day, the "Variety Club Bash" hit town. This lot obviously have a lot of fun belt-

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ing around the outback, raising money for charity in an assortment of cars and costumes. We were doing some sight seeing with the UHF radio on scanning mode. We very quickly picked up the Bash's UHF channel and so listened in. It was continual conversation, one liners and assorted humour. But amongst all this was the controllers instructions and advice. So we were rather intrigued when the call went out to the "Barbie Mobile" to put some clothes on as they would be expected to stop at the Yowah Public School and it would be inappropriate to be unclad. As a matter of interest the Yowah Public School has a total of 5 students.

Barbie Girls now clad, but only partially I suspect as they remained in the car.

Note: the camera crew came to town with the bash.

The following day we headed out along the Black Gate Track for Lake Bindegolly, a grand distance of 40km

END of Part 1.

