

TRAVEL ADVENTURES IN THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK



PART 1 - ARNHEM LAND

&

PART 2 - DOWN THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

by Charles and Robin Pope

Members - ADFAS Pokolbin

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PART 1

ARNHEM LAND

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As part of a larger expedition we joined Outback Spirit on a 10 day trip across Arnhem Land in June, 2016. On our way north we realised a long held ambition and put our 4WD on the Ghan and travelled from Adelaide to Darwin. This was a great experience, travelling in some comfort, stopping for a pre-dawn breakfast at Marla to see the sun rise. The Ghan is over a kilometre long so there were logistical details in temporary lighting to get all passengers in one location. After lunch we arrived at Alice Springs for a four hour stop. There were various excursions planned, but our intended helicopter flight was cancelled due to weather so we had a most enjoyable afternoon with an old school friend, David Hewitt and his wife Margaret. The next day we had a four hour stop at Katherine for a cruise along Katherine Gorge. After a 5pm arrival at Darwin we collected our 4WD and spent two days in Darwin, where both our fathers were stationed during WWII.



Welcome to country.

We joined two of my cousins (John and David Woodside and David's wife Enid) and took the early morning flight to Gove (Nhulunbuy) and after some free time met the rest of our fellow travellers for a short orientation drive and dinner. Next day we explored the Gove region, starting with a welcome to country by some of the local people - it was a delightfully warm and genuine event, with some explanations of the meanings of each dance and invitations to join in. Big mistake!

Lunch was at one of the old trading stations where local aboriginal people traded with Macassans who collected trepan (sea slugs). This trade took place from around the fifteenth century until it was banned by local authorities in the early twentieth century when they realised they could not effectively tax it. Some things never change. There are relics and artistic representations of this trade all over Arnhem Land.



*Will Stubbs and his daughter Siena
(Photo courtesy Buku Arts Centre)*

Later we visited the Buku Arts Centre at Yirrkala and had a most interesting host in Will Stubbs, a former criminal lawyer who began working with the local people in 1995. He maintains he married above his station when he married Merrkiyawuy Ganamba, school principal, author academic and Yothu Yindi backing singer. He talked at detail about moieties (identifiable tribal, ritual and religious groups) and the sophisticated way in which the clan groups are organised. There was also a rush from many of our group to buy some of the amazing artworks on sale.



Arafura Camp host Johnny Pascoe

Next stop was a drive to Outback Spirit's new camp at the Arafura Swamp. The word "camp" is probably an understatement as the accommodation is a superb new camp - 12 upmarket tents. I think the new word is "glamping". Our host was Johnny Pascoe, whose tribe are the traditional owners of the area.

Johnny also played a role the film "Ten Canoes", much of which was shot around Arafura Swamp, and danced with the Bangarra dance company.



The early morning views from the camp were stunning.



Crocodile on Liverpool Estuary

A cruise on the swamp gave excellent viewing of sea eagles and crocodiles

Next stop was at Barramundi Lodge, recently bought and revitalised by Outback Spirit. The lodge is perched looking over the estuary of the Liverpool River. The nearby settlement of Maningrida is the regional port and has interesting galleries and a museum. As the name implies, fishing is a big part of life at Barramundi Lodge and our visit was no disappointment. Malcolm won the prize for our group with this one. For those not inclined to fish there was an extensive trip up the river. An Indonesian crabbing crew were also in Maningrida and that night we feasted on barramundi and crab.



Malcolm (obscured) with his catch assisted by Lance, our host.



Jabiru on Liverpool Estuary

Our third camp was Mt Borradaile, just across the East Alligator River from Kakadu. The special attraction here was the large number of rock paintings, many of which comprised very old paintings over-painted with more modern work. There is a striking representation of the Rainbow serpent which presented a photographic challenge, being around 4 metres long, in a space only one metre high, shooting overhead, so required a series of 4 photos stitched together.



Rock art Rainbow Serpent in caves near Mt. Borradaile, just across the East Alligator River from Kakadu.

It's really quite an intimidating painting and I guess if the idea was to strike fear into the hearts of wilful children it would have been quite a success. The caves at Mt. Borradaile also contained extensive relics from trade such as metal tools with the more advanced Macassans.

A highlight at Mt. Borradaile was the twilight cruise on the swamp



Sea Eagle on the twilight cruise on the swamp at Mt. Borradaile.



Magpie Goose on the twilight cruise on the swamp at Mt. Borradaile.

Our last stop was at Seven Spirits Bay on the tip of the Coburg Peninsular. This involved driving to the Ranger Station and a boat trip across to the delightful and isolated resort on Port Essington Bay. The whole resort has had a complete makeover. From Seven Spirits Bay we visited Victoria Settlement, further up the bay. This was established as an outpost in the north and existed for 11 very difficult years from 1838 to 1849. From Seven Spirits Bay it was a short flight over Melville Island to Darwin.

From there it was on to Lake Argyle, the Bungle Bungles, Broome, Karijini National Park, Kalgoorlie and home across the Nullarbor. But that's another story...

PART 2

DOWN THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

by Charles and Robin Pope
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The Arnhem adventure leads to thoughts of our earlier trip down the Canning Stock Route. Ever felt like jolting over 1700 km on some of Australia's worst (and most remote) roads and camping for 12 nights, just to look at rusty steel and decaying timber? If so, this trip is for you.

Ever since David Chudleigh, an old university friend and two mates became the first to traverse the Canning Stock Route by motor vehicle in 1968, this unique piece of early Australian nation building has held my interest. We had balked at the cost and time of preparation of our own 4WD for the trip, not to mention finding suitable travelling companions with similar interests and vehicles and gaps in their schedules. Within hours of Outback Spirit announcing they were going to offer a trip along the Canning we were on the waiting list.



Soft sand conditions on the dunes make progress difficult.

The first series of trips started in July, 2014, and we joined 15 other similarly minded travellers at Broome and drove to Halls Creek to start the journey. Our fellow travellers were all retirees and included a nurse, geologist, two metallurgists, public servants, physiotherapist, engineer, farmer and teachers. The stock route was established to allow the movement of cattle from the East Kimberley to Wiluna and then to Fremantle for export.

Access to the Wyndham and Derby ports had been denied due to the prevalence of cattle tick, which thrived in the tropical climate of the Kimberley. It was anticipated that any ticks would die in the dry conditions of Central WA over the three to four months' journey. In 1906 - 1907 Alfred Canning surveyed the route.



*One of the 52 wells along the route
used for cattle drives.*

Later, 52 approximately equally spaced wells were established with buckets, windlasses or animal powered whims, buckets and steel watering troughs to allow the cattle and drovers to make the trip. Probably the Federation era equivalent of the National Broadband Network. The journey is a pilgrimage along these 52 wells, which range from replicas lovingly restored by volunteers to functioning windlasses and windmills, down to almost unrecognisable steel and timber relics.

Our Outback Spirit hosts were Mal (the drill sergeant with parade ground voice to match), Mick, Darren and Dan. Each drove a specially modified Mercedes Benz vehicle built to military specifications. Two vehicles were virtually unstoppable 6WDs. One was fitted with camp showers and toilets. The other carried the kitchen, pantry and bar (yes bar). The two 4WDs had a trailer each with a total laden weight between 6 and 7 tonnes depending on how much fuel and water was on board. There were an estimated 800 sand dunes to cross ranging from small to OMG!

The heavily laden 4WDs could not make it over about 10 of the tougher dunes and the 6WDs came to the rescue and pulled them through. There was also a generator for emergencies that allowed charging of batteries needed for modern cameras and other gadgets.

We broke two trailer springs but had two more on board. Another had been stashed in a secret bolthole near Durba Springs just in case. Luckily it wasn't needed. The accommodation bordered on glamping, with easily managed two-man tents, comfortable stretchers and excellent sleeping bags that were ours to keep. (Unclaimed sleeping bags were taken back to Broome for the local Boy Scouts.) Meals were necessarily basic but ample and satisfying.

As soon as the tents were up the bar was opened and we discussed the events of the day over nibbles and drinks. The night skies were predictably brilliant and an excellent opportunity for stargazing and photography. There is something rather special about sitting under the stars in the middle of nowhere listening to Len Beadell's amusing accounts of early exploration of Central Australia on iTunes through the car radio.



Pumping Water.

We encountered one or two other parties each day on the road, including a group of three motorcyclists. One of them had a bad fall and according to radio reports had broken a leg and was pinned under his machine.

On arrival we found the situation not as dire as predicted, but he was badly shaken and his machine was unrideable.

We squeezed him into one of the vehicles and slung his bike onto one of our trailers and transported him until we reached Kunawaritji aboriginal community where he could do repairs and take the shorter cut back to Perth via Marble Bar. The community of Kunawaritji is the most remote community in Australia and home to artist Nora Wompi. We were indeed privileged to encounter Nora and see some of her work.

After eight days on the track we had the luxury of a lay day at Durba Springs, a delightful oasis with interesting walks that included viewings of significant indigenous art. There was also the opportunity to catch up on washing, work with photographs, reading and just enjoying the luxury of not having to break and make camp for one day.



A windmill drawing water from a well in the afternoon sun.

We were not allowed access to wells 2A to 8 near Wiluna as a local landowner objected to trailers on their property. A negative quickly became a positive by detouring through Glen Ayle station where Pam Ward, her daughter Jessica and granddaughter Tess provided conversation and a morning tea to die for with fresh baked scones, cake and billy tea before pressing on to Wiluna.

Since the start of the track at Billiluna we had only visited one other sign of human habitation when we visited Kunawaritji.

Unfortunately, the Canning stock route only saw a relatively small number of traverses up till 1959 but has been a Mecca for 4WD enthusiasts since the 1970s. Congratulations to Outback Spirit for making the Canning accessible to us pre baby boomers who would otherwise never have been able to experience this marvelous part of our rural heritage.

By Charles and Robin Pope
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