

## FROM BAMBOO SPRINGS TO ALICE SPRINGS

For those members of the Buick Owners Club of Western Australia who have been wondering about the whereabouts of Adrian Barnes (Rally Co-Ordinator for the Buick National Meet of 2004) and partner Jenni Leete, all is about to be revealed.

Adrian and Jenni have been touring extensively since the National Meet and in May 2005 headed north to Jenni's family property at Bamboo Springs, near Marble Bar and Nullagine to look after the property while her brother had a holiday.

From there they intended to head overland to Alice Springs. What an incredible route to pick when you look at the map! As they used to say on Star Trek, "this is the final frontier".

Here is their story in Adrian's and Jenni's words .....

"We named our journey the Four Springs Journey because we (1) Departed from Bamboo Springs, (2) We passed through Skull Springs, (3) We drank from Emu Springs and (4) We arrived safely in Alice Springs.

To reset the scene, we were at Bamboo Springs homestead, sort of west of Nullagine when Hughie dropped four inches of rain which closed many roads and tracks and made dry rivers run. The Oakover River was a possible bar to our intended route.

**Day One:** Clear, mild weather. After bidding farewell to Terry and Joy we wended our way across dirt roads towards Nullagine. Just short of Nullagine we were accosted by a friendly policeman who advised us that we had a hole in the water tank of our camper trailer. Oh bother! He then directed us to a local handyman who, after finding that a plastic connection had broken, dived into his shed, emptied several buckets of bits onto the floor, found a stainless steel replacement and fitted it, then directed us to the "prospectors standpipe" to refill our tank. How much for the personal service, "She'll be right mate, have a good trip!" Amazing stuff.

We then left the last town we would see for 2,000 kilometres. Onto the old Woodie Woodie Road through rugged hills and over rough tracks. Because of the recent rains, there were many 'washouts' and ruts across the dirt road. I managed to negotiate many of them but one large washout caught me by surprise -- broke an internal light in the camper trailer.

Out here people of many languages and talents pass by so internationally recognised signs are a must. Upon coming to a steel picket driven into the ground wearing a weather beaten camel skull from which dangled a leaf spring and a coil spring, we immediately recognised the turnoff to "Skull Springs". A lovely spot. A sole camper was ensconced next to the crystal clear running waters amongst the river gums and black-hearts and seemed at peace with the world.

The turnoff to Eel Springs unfortunately didn't have the same graphic signpost and we missed it but ended up in the Oakover River which was running several channels about 800 metres wide, each channel lined with magnificent gum trees. Upon making our way across part of the river we came to a doubtful section.

Luckily a group from the other side of the river were testing the depth of the waters - saved us getting wet. Subsequently all parties safely negotiated the channels. Having survived the river which we thought might bar our progress, we made camp. Overnight a series of bright lights and noises a few kilometres to the east kept us amused. Next morning a plane landed in the approximate area - obviously the maintenance crew had been up all night repairing rain damage at the mine airstrip.

**Day Two:** Clear mild weather. After a few kilometres of dirt road, we found a newly formed bitumen road, the new Woodie Woodie Road. From this we turned off into Carawine Gorge having passed the Two Sisters, a pair of neat little hills.

Carawine Gorge is a picturesque spot where you could easily spend a few days. At one stage I thought we might be doing the same - by default. As one approaches the gorge, the dirt road becomes loose oval stones, millions of them and seemingly bottomless. Having great faith in our rig I followed the tracks of other travellers right to the waters edge. The further we went, the further I realised that other people were probably not towing a heavy trailer. Eventually the bottomless stones overcame the inertia, we came to a halt. We took the opportunity to have lunch, talk to another couple and take some photos. Low range 4WD j-u-s-t managed to get us back to the firmer track to continue our journey

Turning onto the Telfer Road, we found that too was bitumen for a while, then dirt but as luck would have it, the grader and water truck were working on it to keep it in pristine condition. Lady luck was with us. Wrong! Have slowly passed the grader, we were gaining momentum when strange noises were heard and the rig seemed to slow. Stop! Stop! Inspection showed a trailer tyre had shredded. After holding up the road gang for some time (they didn't seem to mind) we swapped spare wheels and proceeded. Cause of the problem -- a 60 mm Tec screw right through the centre of the tread. Apparently a common occurrence out here, Tec screws shake out of transportable buildings.

Shortly down the track we turned off the "good" road and hit the dirt road towards Kunawattitju Community (near Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route). The further we went the worse were the corrugations. Dinkum, they would have shaken the spots off a drover's dog! At one stage we shuddered to a halt - everything rocking, bouncing and vibrating. I was convinced that the Wagon had blown out the rear shock absorbers; but we had to proceed. It must have been my special day. As the flat tyre held us up for a while, I now as having a bit of trouble finding a good campsite before the sun went too low. At last a track to the left. After about a kilometre of still no campsites, we were well into a sand hill. Blast! The road must have rattled my brain. Now reversing a

heavy trailer about half a kilometre along a soft track is not fun. Eventually I was able to turn about so that's where we camped - right in the middle of the track. From the adjacent sand hill we could plainly see the lights of Telfer - quite a large place.

**Day Three:** Clear mild weather. The first 20 kms were as rough as yesterday. Now about those shock absorbers..... All seemed okay this morning. I believe what had occurred was that the corrugations had boiled the oil and rendered the shockers useless until they cooled again. What a relief!

From here the road wasn't too bad; some rough patches but areas of limestone, ironstone and built up sections. No indication of maintenance out here. Some large sand hills, the road runs between them. Very few trees on the flats, some small pretty gums, shrubs and spinifex. Saw one bustard (bush turkey to you), four groups of camels (16 in total), one solar powered pump - tank running over. We skirted around Lake Dora at the top of Rudall River National Park, bypassed Purnu Community (fuel is available there) and had lunch under a lovely little gum tree - white trunk and branches with bright green leaves.

Later we crossed Lake Auld, parked off the road to take photos and needed 4WD to get back onto the road. Take care! Shortly later we visited Rocky Knoll. Upon climbing the broken granite hill we found a cairn and growing in the rocks nearby were three different varieties of eremophila, some with combination orange/red/lemon flowers and different green leaves and another with greyish foliage and mauve flowers. In WA these plants are sometimes called Poverty Bush, Emu Bush or Tar Bush. In NT they are referred to as Desert Fuchsia.

Our map indicated that there was water in the area but we found none, therefore we carried on to find a campsite. By chance we stumbled onto a series of rock holes surrounded by eremophilas, cassias, wattles and birds. As Jenni said "You can't get better than that!" A great spot to spend a pleasant night around the camp fire.

**Day Four:** Fine and cool. Road rough again but smooth sandy sections at times. Vegetation mostly shrubs, wattles and grevilleas. Mid morning we arrived at Kunararratji and fuelled up, at \$2.20 cents per litre. Drove to Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route where we had lunch and replenished our water supply - good water at this point. Joined for lunch by a fairy wren.

We then headed to a windmill, 23 km off the Jenkins track according to the map and a previous traveller. It proved a flop, mill broken and tank rusted and empty - a sorry sight. We moved on. Back to the Jenkins track and proceeded until reaching Gary Junction. After photographing Len Beadell's marker and surrounding areas and signing the visitors' book, we decided to make camp in a pleasant spot amongst the mulga trees just down the Gary Highway. The date was Thursday 21 July 2005 and if you check your calendar, you will notice it was a full moon.

Full moons and balmy nights can conjure up all sorts of thoughts and situations. After an enjoyable campfire dinner, and a photograph of the full moon, we were

preparing for bed when we heard a strange 'gurgling' sound at the back of the camper. I thought it was the air relief valve on the water tank - Jenni thought it was my stomach.

Nothing further was heard so I proceeded to disrobe. Then it happened again. We both reached the same conclusion together: Camel!

Being the brave hero that I used to be, I grabbed a torch and dived out of the camper. Now a dull torch on a full moonlit night is reasonably ineffective, nevertheless I was determined to defend our camp. Having circled the camp without finding the source of the 'gurgling', I thought my ears must have deceived me. Then it came again, behind the trees. So, grabbing the shovel, I embarked on a camel hunt. At last I found it - lurking in the trees looking confused, bewildered and ugly. The chase was on. I guess the sight of a naked Adrian, looking like a bald yeti running, yelling and brandishing a torch and a shovel was more than the camel could cope with. It bade farewell and was last seen lubbering off down the Gary Highway to seek counselling.

*Part Two continues next month .....*

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### *Part Two*

**Day Five:** Fine mild weather but clouds on the eastern horizon. The road was much the same as other days - parts good, parts not so good. Vegetation was more eremophilas, Wickham grevilleas, spinifex and small shrubs. Some sand hill country. Passed a snake sunning itself on the edge of the road. Two vehicles going west stopped to talk - well, the drivers did. They were from Alice Springs en route to the 80-mile beach in WA to go fishing. They must like fishing.

Jupiter's Well was our stop for lunch. Water is available from a hand pump. A lovely spot. For about 30 km around this pit there are desert oaks, such graceful trees.

Further on at Top-Up Rise, there was no water. Water tank dry. Bore capped. Near Kiwwkurra Community the signposts are quite confusing. We drove in to what the maps, and the permits office, said was deserted. We were met by a couple of helpful people who said the place had been operating for over two years. They have fuel (\$1.60 cpl) and basic accommodation if required. Also, there is Len Beadell's old Bedford ex-army 4WD supply truck. It has been shifted by the Beadell family from its bush grave. We bade farewell to the friendly couple and headed for the main track.

Campsites in this area are scarce but we found one near Mt Webb. Several camels and a couple of serenading dingoes were in the area but gave us no excitement on this occasion. We did see a couple of magpies here.

**Day Six:** Fine with a few clouds. NW wind. Road good to fair. Around here there are grass plains, sand hills either side of us, red earth and soft spinifex. Came across 13 camels, later 25 more. Saw seven burnt out cars - mostly Holdens, some Falcons. Three turkeys flew off from the edge of the road; they obviously have reason to fear people in vehicles. Also saw zebra finches and willy-wagtails.

We detoured to a 'homestead' in a nice area surrounded by desert oaks and backed by mountains. It was obviously none of the many brick and iron buildings built for the aboriginal folk. It was unused, neglected and had been treated unkindly.

As our permit to travel through the NT side of the aboriginal lands precluded us from camping for the next 350 km., we made camp early near Mt Tietkens on the WA side of the border. We took the opportunity of the early camp to transfer fuel from jerry cans to fuel tank, write up diaries etc. As the clouds were building up to the east, I also sought a weather report from our trusty associates on the HF radio; VKS-737. They assured us that we would not be rained upon.

**Day Seven:** Overcast but fine. Away early. Road similar to previous days. Scenery is what you make of it and we thoroughly enjoyed the inland countryside. Saw wild turkeys, camels and sadly, numerous burnt out vehicles.

At Sandy Blight junction we stopped to take photos, check the flowers and have a cuppa. Two vehicles approached us, stopped, and they roared down a side track. Not so much as a wave or 'Hello' out of them. Gone are the days of outback etiquette! Later that day a police vehicle passed us and that driver gave us a big wave, restoring our faith in some travellers.

Mt Liebig and associated ranges were visible for most of the afternoon. Upon entering Papunya Community we came to a cross road with no signposts or directions. Another set of tourists appeared from somewhere. We exchanged information and parted. Obviously they were more confused than we were. Having followed their directions for a while, I changed course and headed down a different road to find the exit route towards Alice Springs.

We continued in view of the ranges, down a turnoff to Haasts Bluff, then into the West Macdonnell Ranges National Park where we camped near Redbank Gorge. No showers here but gas BBQs and bush toilets provided.

**Day Eight:** Weather fine but cold. At this stage we have almost completed our 'crossing of the desert' or as our coloured cousins would say 'crossing of the didgit'. As yet, we have not arrived at the Fourth Spring. This morning we walked into the Redbank Gorge. Magnificent walls of black, red, pink and mauve. One surprise was that we found bright red seed pods of the Chintabel tree. Inspection revealed the trees to be about 30' tall and 18" trunks; these trees are prevalent in the WA Pilbara area but much smaller. Also in Redbank Gorge were eremophila plants; scraggy tall shrubs but with magnificent greeny/cream flowers with mauve throat.

Leaving there we proceeded towards the Alice, passing some rock formations, which reminded Jenni of the "Kadjiwadgetta Track" in the Pilbara -- the track of the large snake. We then drove to Ormiston Gorge -- huge cliffs, water, trees, easy access. Well worth a visit. Had lunch there before travelling on to the Alice.

So at about 3 p.m. on our eighth day we had accomplished our "Four Springs Journey." Did we enjoy it? Yes, we thoroughly enjoyed it. Would we do it again? Possibly yes, but there are so many other challenges before us and places to see that we may not have the time.

Did our 'Rig' survive the trip? Yes, with ease. We have a six-cylinder diesel 4WD towing a solid 'Wanderer' off road camper trailer (built in WA of course). I would not like to tow a trailer or caravan built for bitumen roads. I am sure they would fill with dust and/or rattle to bits.

Some modern sedans/wagons with little ground clearance may have trouble on the roughish sections. Any two wheel drive vehicle could do the trip provided it had good tyres, good shock absorbers and good ground clearance (just like the good old 'vintage' cars). From Nullagine the sand or water at the Oakover

River may stop two wheel drive vehicles. From Marble Bar the road is bitumen for some way so the river is no problem.

From Nullagine/Marble Bar WA to Alice Springs NT is just under 2000 km. Diesel fuel is available at the various aboriginal communities across the track. Because of the problems associated with 'petrol sniffing' some communities only provide unleaded petrol if you phone in advance so they can order it in.

We know of people who have done the crossing in two days. That's not for us.

*Adrian Barnes & Jenni Leete.*