

The Simpson Desert 2017

☺ The Journey ☺

Convoy: Mike and Clare, Alex and Maria, Paul and Terri and Tam, Steve and Sandra,
Andrew and Hertha, Doug and Wynonna, Richard and Jemi and Izac and Dean

Dates: 22 July to late August 2017 (for most!)

What a foggy start to the trip, Toodyay and Northam were 'socked-in' but after the meet and greet with a 9.30am take off from a fog free Tammin, we began our journey. Lunch was at the Southern Cross BP Roadhouse then camped at Lake Douglas (15k west of Kalgoorlie) and it was cold that first night.

The next day began with a quick breakfast at camp and a top-up in Kalgoorlie at MacDonald's for us and fuel for the trucks, Leonora beckoned.



We stopped in Laverton for a fuel top-up and a quick look around town. Just out of town the bitumen ended (not to be seen again in any quantity till Kata Tjuka in the NT). We aired down and pushed on. Soon we saw live eagles, a dead camel and a bit of dust, corrugations and rocks!

We had another cold night at The Pines so the campfire was very welcome. Terri made yummy banana choc and apple dumplings on the fire.

On the road next morning we explored a large white cross on the hill to our South – erected by missionaries. By 9.30am, Wynonna had counted 28 car wrecks off the road since leaving Laverton. To the South was the Gibson Desert and to the North was the Sandy Desert – funny they both looked the same. We stopped at Tjukaylria Roadhouse for lunch.

Further down the road we saw a road sign saying “*Road works for the next 121km*”. The road was in good condition with only a few patches of corrugations (so far). In Warburton our clocks were advanced 1.5 hours to Great Central time.

The Warburton Roadhouse was a busy little place with a number of the Community people using the store while we were there. During our night in the ‘fenced-off’ compound - yes barbed wire too, Mike calls it ‘*Stalag Warburton*’ - we were kept amused by a large muster (Google) of peacocks strutting about the Caravan Park calling out to whoever would listen.

Next day Izac and Dean got a ride in a Police paddy wagon but happily they were paroled in time for us to leave. We left Warburton at 9.30am after topping-up some more fuel.

Camels were spotted, with lots of tracks by the road. Did you know that a one hump camel is called a Dromedary or Arabian camel, and a two hump camel is called a Bactrian camel. Q: How did Camels end up in the outback? (Good question) They were imported into Australia from British India and Afghanistan during the 19th Century for transport and construction during colonisation of the central and western part of Australia. Many were released into the wild after motorised transport replaced the use of camels in the early 20th century – now you know!

There were more bulldozers and graders building up the road. A further sign said “*Road-works next 121km!*” (They do things big out here) We are now 1,380km from home.

After morning tea, Richard got a flat tyre on the left hand side of the caravan – he ran over a piece of angle iron. He and Steve worked hard and fast and 15 minutes later (I think the Bathurst guys do it faster) we hit the road again - thanks go to Andy and Doug for their help too.

At the Warakurna Roadhouse Caravan Park the accommodation in comparison to Warburton, was wide, open and unfenced. At night the dingoes howled and the Police dogs across the road barked - what a racket. Andy and Hertha had their rubbish bag stolen by dingoes and Andy lost a broom from his roof rack too (dingos?)

Convoy members visited the Giles Meteorology Station nearby. A museum provides information about the station including the endeavours of Len Beadell and his 'Gun Barrel Road Construction Crew'. The weather station was originally built to provide information for the rocket testing out of Woomera and later for the atomic tests further south near Maralinga in SA - it continues to supply weather information today. A section of a rocket from the testing range - that Len's roads were built to service - is on display in the car park, right next to the shelter containing Len's old grader.

Next morning the rest of the convoy visited the Weather Station and as they were pondering the rocket and Len's grader a man approached and invited them to watch the weather balloon being released. The balloon hauled a transmitter, sending information back to the station where a computer collected the data about the weather patterns in the area.

As we headed east Mike alerted the convoy to big dips and rocky patches on the road ahead. We passed the picturesque Rawling Ranges with patches of fir trees and River Gums dotting the landscape. An oncoming car sped by and Dicko was heard to say "*Must be a sale on at Aldi*" (funny guy). We stopped at one of the Len Beadell Blaze Trees for photos. It served as a reminder of the pioneering work this Australian man undertook and the hardships he and his family endured in this remote place.

We passed a sign that read 30km to the NT border, Docker River Community (to our right) and camel poo too (Mike: I missed *that* sign!) Terri sighted another Dingo (Dingo whisperer?) We stopped at Lasseter's Cave for lunch and discovered his interesting story. Izac and Dean re-enacted Lasseter starving to death in his cave, but happily the boys recovered and we trudged on!

By late morning we reached Kata Tjuka (formally known as the Olgas) – breathtaking. It is quite a formidable rock when you see it up close and personal. We stopped to explore for a while. Dicko had his second blowout here, but it was only his thong (plugger!) and as he came prepared with a spare, no real tragedy here (how long did it take to change that blow-out?). As we would be on bitumen for the next day or so to Alice Springs, we took the time to air up again.

Uluru (formally known as Ayres Rock) was memorable. The sun setting on the Rock was striking. Some of the convoy stayed at the sunset viewing area and were rewarded with an awesome sight.

Yulara was a very busy place with tourists everywhere (us too?). The grassed areas and tenting looked good (and it was) though Doug had a full jerry can of water taken from next to his car (did anyone see a two legged dingo?)

Next day, the convoy passed the Mt Connor lookout and a table top mountain (Mt Ebenezer) near the Curtin Springs Station Roadhouse. We had now travelled 2,000klm since leaving home. We stopped at the Eriks Roadhouse at the Stuart Highway intersection for a long lunch. We passed Stuarts Well and a 130kph speed limit sign - what is the speed limit for caravans and trucks? (Mike: *110kph*). In Alice, the convoy did some errands with Mike replacing his corrugations broken headlight globe - three blokes; a beer; a screwdriver; and then a torch = 3 hours! Alex and Maria de-dusted their new caravan - it did survive the crossing.

Alex and Maria were staying in Alice before heading home via the Stuart and Eyre Highways in a few days. The convoy said their goodbyes and headed off. Out past the Alice Springs airport, we arrived at the gravel again and aired down. So began stage two of our journey – corrugations, rocks and something new; bulldust.

We passed two signs that said “Binns Track” and “4 wheel drive recommended”. We had to open (and close) some gates, passing some indifferent cattle on the road sides. After the excitement of navigating a BIG patch of bulldust, Andy stopped for some adjustments to his roof rack itself.

The landscape changed dramatically, from cattle chewed forests to wide open treeless plains and hard rocky expanses. We stopped at the ‘Mac Clark Conserve Reserve’ to look at some rare trees - Acacia Peuce: a hard wood, slow growing desert-oak like tree. They gathered in groups scattered about an incredibly featureless landscape, being one of only three stands of this rare variety in Australia. The trees were fenced off and a rickety old turn-style gate allowed access (it was free). We could have wandered around the acreage, but the one tree nearby said it all - tall, old, hard, lonely, bleak! The in-car temp gauge read 30⁰c now - it must be hellish hot here in full summer.

Then, Old Andado, what a special treat. It is a pastoral homestead that has been heritage listed and maintained as it was recently left when the then 93 year old Molly Clark had to move on. She had been in Adelaide for her final few years but her pantry, cooking appliances, bedroom, and radio and office area were all exactly as it had been when she lived there. It looked like she would walk in through the door any second. It was a very special place to set up camp nearby. Molly was married to Mac Clark from the rare tree site - which he had established. Old Andado was an oasis.

It was 253km to Mt Dare - a fuel stop/shop/Hotel. Mt Dare is in the middle of nowhere (where is the mountain?) but it has two cool army Land Rovers, a friendly dog and a great beer garden. The inside was clean, cool and full of interesting paraphernalia (souvenirs) and friendly locals too. We all fuelled-up: diesel, food, souvenirs and jerry cans too. Photos were taken and we moved on towards the Dalhousie Springs - our overnight stop.



It was a fun day, especially when it ended in the most peaceful and relaxing hot springs. The camp ground had cold showers and flush toilets. Izac and Dean saw Dingos walking past Terri’s camp - Terri *must be* a Dingo Whisperer! The ‘Springs’ were a definite relief al-be-it a bit warm for a day time swim - better in the cool of the misty early morning. After another morning swim in the Hot Springs we prepared to set off again. We said goodbye to Paul, Terri and Tam as they started their own journey back home.

Stage three: Welcome to the western entrance to ‘The Simpson Desert’. We stopped for a short morning tea at Purni Bore (another artesian-basin drill site - capped) before turning south onto the Rig Road with a late lunch at a lonely grave-site beside the Mokari airport. From here we were on the WAA line heading due east. We travelled about 10km past this point and set up our first bush camp in the ‘Simpson Desert Conservation Park’ woo hoo!

The single track was firmly well travelled and subsequently well corrugated. We could only travel at about 30kph. Later tyres were deflated again to between 15-18 PSI. There were many Dingo tracks (where’s Terri?). The track was way more fun than a rollercoaster at the Royal Show - and free too. There was red sand, spikey tan spinifex and bushes of all shapes and sizes. The Wattles (acacias) had a bright yellow flower and were stunning. Tyre pressures were re-adjusted and Doug used his ‘max-tracks’ to conquer a hill - we were now 3,000km from home.

I think it is the 1st of August 2017 today?! We did 13km in 1 hour at one stage. The sand dunes are getting bigger and the track snakes ever eastwards - we are now in the 'Simpson Desert Park'. Not long after turning north onto the 'Knolls Track' we stopped at the 'Approdina Atorra Knolls' (hills) for a look and lunch before arriving at the 'French Line' 'T' junction. Later Mike's determination (and more deflating of tyres) was rewarded on one tall stubborn sand dune (and those Club day-trips to Lancelin paid off). The camping that night was in a star-lit and cold outback swale again.

We turned north off the French line to visit Poepples Corner, arriving early in the morning. Mr Augustus Poepple used the chain measurement - *a chain is an Imperial unit of length that measures 66 feet, 22 yards (20.12m) or the same length as a cricket pitch* - to create the NT/QLD/SA State and Territory boundaries. His chain stretched by about an inch (25mm) in the heat over the length of the trip - he was only out by about two cricket pitches or 40.24 metres, when checked by GPS many years later.



We turned East onto the QAA line after travelling along the edge of a large salt lake at a hair raising 60kph. We camped against the edge of another swale about 10km from Big Red.

It was cold and windswept that morning. Mike came over the radio with "I think we have arrived at Big Red". As we crested the penultimate sand dune (which was pretty big itself) we could see the next dune far, far across the next swale, where a series of evenly spaced sand tracks ascended that dune. It looked so small from here, not very impressive at all. But as you might expect, as we approached across that last wide dry swale, that little hill got BIG. Oh yeah, I can see why they call it 'Big Red', it's a whopper (without fries). We stopped, took photos, discussed tyre pressures, aired-down; down; down then Dicko led the charge. His 200 is a big vehicle, but as he approached Big Red it got small and then even smaller as he ascended that red sandy slope - did he make it?

. . . Yep, we all conquered Big Red, and the view was panoramic. Big Red looks and feels like a proper sand dune. We had a play for a while and took some more photos. The ridgeline was windswept on that clear, cold August morning so we retreated to our vehicles and descended the other side for morning tea, and to air-up and to take sand flags down. We crossed the flats where the crowds had camped the previous month for the annual 'Big Red Bash' and onto a very nice bitumen road, and onwards to Birdsville where we would arrive in time for lunch - at the Bakery.

Arriving in Birdsville and you would think the Bakery would be easy to find in a small, flat place like Birdsville! But after a short drive around town (Mike had to ask directions from some other tourists!) we found the Bakery tucked in behind the town oval where we enjoyed a famous Curry Camel or a Kangaroo and Claret pie. Feeling satiated we finally headed for the Birdsville Caravan Park to book in - with a long hot shower next in the order of business.

That evening we headed for the Birdsville Hotel for a few quiet drinks with the small crowd. As you would expect, the main bar is full of character(s) and then, what turned out to be a very big dinner - the meals were enormous and very satisfying. A few souvenirs were located and purchased. A very pleasant evening was followed with a short stroll back to the Caravan Park through the dusty empty streets (nope! No tumbleweeds or Dingos howling!), where we all happily retired to our tents and swags for the night.

The standard population of Birdsville is 115 people, but the grey nomads and 4wd adventurers (hey, that's us) outnumber the locals most of the time, however during race week the population can increase to around 7,000 peaking at around 10,000 in a good year!

Leaving Birdsville, we spotted about 20 horses standing across the road un-moved including a lone camel that Dicko tried unsuccessfully to befriend! We have travelled 3,660km since leaving home 15 days ago.

We arrived in Bedourie for lunch in the main street. We all visited the Information Centre and a few purchases of an authentic 'Bedourie Camp Oven' were made.

The convoy arrived in Boulia and booked straight into the Caravan Park for a night. Boulia is as far from Perth as we got on this 'Out and About Club' trip. Boulia as a town was quaint at best.

Note: at Boulia the convoy split up a bit, with Dicko and Steve heading back towards Alice Springs ahead of Mike, Doug and Andrew. We would all meet again in Alice Springs with stories to tell.

The rest of us left Boulie around 9:30am and on to the Donahue/Plenty Highway heading back West - the landscape in this far flung part of South Western Queensland was devoid of trees; rolling fields of Mitchell grass, a big sky and corrugations were our only company.

Arriving over the NT border at Tobermorey Station - what an oasis, we were greeted with a small but grassy camping ground complete with a small herd of poddy calves, a couple of dogs, one with only three legs - actually the fourth leg was temporarily tucked into his collar to slow him down a bit. The lady in the shop was friendly and helpful, allowing us to use the campsite amenities. We lingered awhile for lunch in the shade on the lawn and Andrew topped-up with fuel. Then Jervoise Homestead, what a contrast - the 'shop' was a tin shed with no hot or cold food available and the lady was pleasant but in a very stand-offish kind of way - we did not linger long.

We camped in the bush in the (moon) shadow of a microwave dish tower. Cows were gently mooing nearby but otherwise the site was quiet and very peaceful. As the wind had died down, we had a really nice fire that night thanks to the well-engineered fire pit completed by Doug.

Monday morning, we journeyed on, passing some extensive road works and enjoying the majestic Harts Ranges to the South. The trip here was uneventful and as we neared the turn-off to the Northern part of the Binns Track, Doug and Wynona decided to visit a meteorite crater they spotted on the map. As it wasn't very far, the rest of us decided to continue on to Gemtree Station to camp that night. Doug and Wynona caught up later without any mishap (and a load of rock samples).

Gemtree is a paradise if you are into gem fossicking. It has a very pleasant café/shop/roadhouse which we made good use of. Clare and later Hertha and Wynona checked out the gems in the shop. Next morning we headed the 70klm to Alice Springs (on bitumen!)

Crossing the Tropic of Capricorn, the acknowledgement of the Tropic on the Stuart Highway greatly surpasses the small, lonely WA sign - toilets; picnic seats; sealed truck bay; signage . . .

Mike and Clare caught up with Jemma, Dicko, Izac and Dean - and then Steve and Sandra - in the camp kitchen for a chat - we were in the same Caravan Park. Doug and Wynona and Andrew and Hertha, had found another Park nearby for the three nights.

Mike and Clare spent the day in town while Mike's Prado got a new timing belt and a service and Mike had the biggest breakfast he has ever failed to finish - Wicked (Café). Doug and Wynona went exploring the Ormiston Gap and other attractions. Andrew and Hertha did their own touristy things and later that evening we all got to say goodbye to Steve and Sandra as they would be heading west again early the next morning.

Thursday: we all did some more touristy things bumping into each other from time to time in the Alice CBD. We all met at Clare and Mike's cabin that evening for a goodbye chat with Dicko, as we were leaving the next day. We went for dinner at 'Uncles Tavern' at the 'Diplomat Hotel' in the

middle of town. The entertainer was a bit loud inside so we found a table outside (thanks Doug). A little later we were entertained by a local lady who took a loud dislike to the couple at the next table. It was quite a performance with some colourful opinions by our impromptu hostess. She eventually wandered off down the street muttering to herself. The meals, when they finally arrived were abundant and delicious.

Friday: we left town and headed west for a short stop at Hermannsburg, and then south into Palm Valley. The track in was rough and patchy, crossing the dry Finke riverbed several times however, not far from the entrance to the Park we had encountered a big bulldust hole.

While stopped to assess the crossing with another vehicle already there, a trio of vehicles exiting the Park, ploughed through the bulldust hole with apparent ease and as the lead vehicle pulled up next to Mike he was challenged by the female driver to make the crossing or suffer the indignity of not going where a female did! Mike took up the challenge and did the crossing with grace and elegance except for the large indignant 'bump' over some object in the middle. Andrew and Doug followed through without mishap - we do not know where the other vehicle went?

We meandered along the twisting trail crossing the dry Finke river bed several times until finally arriving at the very pleasant camp ground. However the toilets were being repaired and the Ranger and the signs directed us to the day visitor area further along the track, where we stayed - there were functional toilets but no showers. What a pleasant valley. Doug and Wynona completed the journey to the Palms in Palm valley. We returned to the main camping ground that evening for a presentation by the Ranger. Well worth the round trip – driving at night is different.

We reluctantly packed up the next morning and headed off again. The journey out of Palm Valley was uneventful except for the sight of wild horses and the re-navigation of the bulldust hole. Doug went ahead and filmed Andrew and Mike successfully traversing the dusty hole again.

We cruised all the way back to Alice Springs stopping for fuel near the caravan parks.

It was nice being on the bitumen again though the traffic was a bit heavier. We came upon the turnoff to the Henbury Meteorite Craters. A very wide but hard and rocky road led to the equally hard and rocky craters. Very little flora was in this whole area. We had planned to camp there that night but it was bleak (and did I mention rocky?) The stroll around the five craters was absorbing as one was a double impact crater - apparently one meteor broke up and the two halves crashed into the same spot. To my eye, it was impossible to say which rocks were meteorites and which were natural – I admit it had been a few thousand years! Doug and Wynona happily fossicked, taking pictures and collecting some more rock samples.

Andrew, Hertha, Mike and Clare left Doug and Wynona to wander happily through the scree field, agreeing to catch up at the Erdunda Roadhouse caravan park later that evening – they did and happily with more samples for Wynona's rock garden (quarry?) back home.

After a good night's sleep, we packed up and headed west for the final stage of our trip. We stopped at Mt Ebenezer Roadhouse for an ice-cream and a look at the local artists' offerings stopping again at Curtain Springs for lunch beneath the shady pergola.

Being only a short distance today we arrived in Yulara early in the afternoon and found tent sites near the camp kitchen, which turned out to be a bit busy with a young French speaking bus tour taking possession of the kitchen and its surroundings – all good and a bit entertaining. Mysteriously a 'pup' tent appeared near Andrew and Mike's tents and we never saw the occupants. It was still there when we left the next day with still no-one in sight.

A woman walked through our tent site that evening and Clare recognised her as the driver from the bulldust hole in Palm Valley – they were camped across the oval from us. She stopped for a

long chat and later showed Mike the Toyota tray back she and her husband were in. Interesting, the hubby had used an old beer barrel as a water container under the tray – what a blasphemy!

We packed up early and headed off for a drive around Uluru. It is a Big Rock – awesome! We took some photos and read the memorial plaques telling of the 36 or so visitors who have lost their lives while climbing the rock. But when one tourist ascended the start of the climb on all fours like a spider, we figured we would respect the local elder’s wishes and forego our attempt to see what there was to see from the top.

We loitered for a while then continued our driving tour of the base of the Rock stopping for a few photos along the way. We stopped at a point of interest where we could go on a short walk. The car park here featured a truck offering Segway tours – tempting – but we opted to explore on foot. We then headed for the Discovery Centre and café (and souvenir shop) where we had lunch.



We then made another quick stop at the sunrise viewing platform overlooking Kata Tjuta and the last long-range view of Uluru back to the east. Shortly, we arrived at the start of the Great Central road again in the shadow of Kata Tjuta, we aired down, ready for the next few days of dirt road driving - for the last time. We passed the signage at the NT/WA border and after the compulsory photos, continued

on to Warrakuna (and the dingos) for the night.

The rest of the trip west was uneventful with the exception of the overnight camp at the Breakaways 128k west of Warburton (with lonely dingos howling at dusk).

We stopped for lunch at The Pines before we arrived at Laverton for a top-up of diesel and camping at the caravan park in Leonora for the night.

Next morning Andrew and Hertha were first to head off, meeting up with friends in Coolgardie. We all said our tearful goodbyes and waved them out the gate. Doug, Wynona, Mike and Clare meandered on to Kalgoorlie opting to stay for a couple of nights at the Prospector Caravan Park.

After a bit of washing, Mike and Clare and Doug and Wynona went off to do some sight-seeing.

Next day Doug and Wynona left early and headed for home. Mike and Clare decided to meander a bit more, had lunch at the Ettamoogah Pub in Cunderdin before staying one last night at a motel in Merredin where they had stayed in some years before – it was under new ownership and the rooms had been modernized, though not obvious from the outside.

It was raining back in Perth . . . we arrived home and started the big clean - so much red dust. Other than Dicko, Jemmi, Isac and Dean, all the convoy were now back home, with some anticipating their overseas flight and others contemplating hitching up the caravan for destinations yet to be decided.

What a trip – over 7,800 mostly dusty corrugated kilometres; some great and iconic destinations; many surprises and few disappointments; but plenty of stories to tell; and great photos. No major vehicle problems and great company one and all.



I for one cannot wait to return to some of these destinations and spend more time exploring the wider areas in-between. There is so much to see in Australia and the distances, although great, are totally worth the effort for what you will discover . . . the journey never ends 😊

THE END
. . . of this trip