

TERRA AUSTRALIS



**DIE GESCHICHTEN VON UNSERER ZWEIJÄHRIGEN REISE
DURCH AUSTRALIEN 2009-2011**

AUSTRALIAN TRAVEL STORIES FROM 2009-2011



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Our Dream

Our longtime dream comes true. We have received a multiple entry Visum for Australia. We will travel the whole continent with a car and caravan (no Motorbikes for the time being). Beat has drawn a wonderful map with all the highlights which we want to visit. Apart from all the wonders of nature and animal life, we are interested in pre historic and contemporary art of the Aborigines. In Europe we have seen 18'000 years old artifacts of high ranking visual art. The oldest artworks in Australia are 40'000 years of age. We will tell you all about it fresh from the press in our Blog. We will fly on November 26 to Melbourne to our "oldest" youth friends George, Deanne and Claudine. From there we will tell you how we fare with the purchase of a car and caravan etc. Stay tuned..

Our first week in Australia

A lot of things are different, and some are much easier than in Switzerland. We purchased our Toyota Landcruiser Troopcarrier on a Sunday. The Australian Automobile Club, RACV, offers a technical estimation service, which we used. They check used cars and then give a report on possible hidden faults. We were positively surprised at the good evaluation our car got. Just some minor defects needed to be righted and we will be getting the car today. Our Caravan, a Jayco Sterling 18", with Aircondo, Stove, Oven, Toilet/Shower, TV and more frills which seems to be necessary here. As a Negative, there is no mover on the Caravan. Beat already has the flutters because of that. The caravans are heavier and better insulated than ours. You may look forward to some good stories later. We found both vehicles in the Internet and they corresponded exactly to our specifications. The taking out of the insurances and the opening of the banking account have been super easy.

Meanwhile we live with George, Deanne and their grown up daughter Claudine in a lovely country house with Swimming Pool and beautifully manicured garden. WE contributed a little to the upkeep by helping to cut the many roses. George took the hedgetrimmer, but Beat and I did it a bit more subtle with normal secateurs. That is where we got our first sunburn. From now on we will be a bit more cautious. The view from the garden is breathtaking and there were Kangaroos to greet us, on our arrival late at night.

We went for a stroll in the adjacent Nationalpark and were ogled by a whole family of big, small, old and young Kangaroos as if we were the inmates in zoo. There, we also saw the first emerald green and red parrots. A Kookaberry sits every evening on an old gumtree and laughs at us. Paradise pure...

We got our first experience with driving on the left under the strict supervision of George. It takes some getting used to sitting on the right and having the gearshift on the left. The indicators are also on the wrong side for us. We will have some fun with that in the near future. George owns a vintage Rolls Royce and took us for a Sunday drive through the hills East of Melbourne. We went to a little picturesque Victorian Town with a train station for Puffing Billy, a steam train which brings Tourist to the hills.

George and Claudine own a 10 month old Scottish Collie named Beamer. He is a lovely dog with a very playful character. With the help of some kibbles Beat and I gave him some obedience training, with the result, that, in an unsupervised moment, he got my shoe and chewed it to bits!!! So much for the trainer....!

Initially we planned to go to Tasmania from here, but the fares on the ferry are so steep for our Caravan, that we decided to go to the old Goldtown Ballarat and the Grampians, another Nationalpark, first. We will eventually go to Tasmania, but only with our car and not the Caravan.

Shoping

We have never spent so much money in so little time. Our car received best marks from the RACV test. Nevertheless we have mounted new Offroad tyres and built a wooden Platform to increase the room in the back. Beat received a cruise control for relaxed driving and we had to install an electrical brake unit for the caravan.

Our caravan has a 150 l fridge which had to be filled. The trolley overflowed and nearly got a flat because of the heavy weight.

Then we drove to the Gaspump: 160 l Diesel! In two tanks. It just guzzled and the dollars went higher and higher. Luckily we still had a voucher from the grocery shopping which gave us a rebate of 8c per liter. Better than nothing. Diesel is cheaper here than in Europe but we will feel the heavy weight of the caravan in our budget nevertheless.

We were very lucky with both our vehicles. The caravan is practically new. It was used for a very short time and hardly shows any signs of wear. Because of the different qualities of the roads from AAA to riverbed, the caravans are built much sturdier here. The chassis looks like from a lorry. When I asked the dealer about the ALKO Chassis he just laughed and said, they would not survive the local roads for long. Most of the internal works like Toilet, warm water boiler, Fridge etc, come from Europe however. All bigger caravans are equipped with an electrical braking system. As soon as Beat started to brake in the car, we heard the tyres screech and we produced a black mark on the road. The unit was set up too strong. We adjusted it a bit and now Car and Caravan agree on the strength of the breaking. But then, the cruise did not work anymore. An analysis of the electrician showed, that our brake lights had a fuse with 10 Amps which was too weak. A 15 Amp fuse presented us with renewed brake lights. Now what have brake lights in common with the cruise? No brake light – no cruise. As simple as that.

The fact that everyone drives on the left hand side, sits on the right side of the car, has the indicator on the right side of the steering wheel and shifts with left hand is a real challenge. But, that the other motorists pass us left and right at all speeds is taking things a bit far. Nevertheless, it is completely legal here. One can overtake on any side as long as one does not pass a double line. Normal single white lines are passable any time. In addition to that, each state has some finesse to their traffic code. In Victoria, for example, we are allowed to turn left despite a red light if there is a special turning lane. One just does not have right of way. Very practical.

With a few days delay due to all the technical fine tuning, we have now arrived at our first stop in Creswick, site of one of the earliest gold finds in Australia.

Goldrush

When we finally got our act together and left Melbourne, it was 40 C, the hottest day so far this summer. There was a hot, strong, dry wind from the Deserts in the North. An ideal day to check the efficiency of our Airconditioning. In the car it was so so la la. But on the Campground in the Caravan, that was something else. We had a very agreeable 25 C in no time. We rescued ourselves every couple of minutes in there to cool off a bit while installing all the equipment. Even the simple Campgrounds offer electricity and watertap at the site. We can take water directly from the mains and Beat does not have to carry water any longer. We have looked in vain for the familiar watertanks with wheels to carry clean water to and gray water from the caravan. They do not exist here. We know now how to get freshwater, but what to do with the gray water? We were given 10 m of sillage hose and a coupling to connect to the caravan, but where to put the other end? Nobody was very specific. The consensus was, that the dry ground would quickly swallow any drop we would disperse. No worries! We found a hole near our van and put the end in there. All was well, until I washed up the first time in the van and then let the water of the sink gush out. It gurgled and splurged and viola, the shower was full of water resplendent with the red remains of the tomato sauce. We studied, analysed and discussed the problem, then accepted my suggestion. We turned the coupling around so that the Kitchen water comes first and does not surge up the line to the shower, So far it works. The shower in our van is really very efficient. This was proved at 3 am when Beat went to the Toilet and inadvertently opened the shower. In no time he was wet through and fully awake. Almost at the same time it started to rain and the temperature dropped from 40 C to 10 C. It is a constant up and down with the temperature and the weather here.

Our Campground has 3 stars. We could not care less, as long as the whole surroundings are good, but camp owner Frank cares. It was time to cut my hair and I decided I would do that in the common shower area. There, I can see myself in the mirrors, contrary to the Van, where even Beat sees only his forehead. There were 3 sockets. I tried the first, no electricity. The Second, same thing. I knew that the third had to work, since a girl was drying her hair with a blowdryer. I was so thrilled that the shaver worked, that I forgot to put on one of the regulators for the length. I shaved a right path down to the roots before I noticed. Well, I just left the surrounding hair a bit longer, nobody is the wiser. Next time I saw Frank I asked him about the two sockets. He smiled and showed some missing front teeth "I know" he said "I should once connect them, did not get round to it yet. You know, we need a socket per washbasin in order to get the 3 stars. There is no rule, that they have to be connected." That's Aussi rules.

We are in the heart of the goldfields. Close by, the first gold was discovered in 1851. We keep our eyes to the ground, just in case there would be a blitz of gold, finally letting us have unknown riches. The largest Nuggets ever found, one 69 the other over 70 kg were found around here. We have seen them in the Goldmuseum at Ballarat. There! on the embankment to the railroad, under a fallen gum tree leave. What is this? I can hardly believe it. Could it be? Will we be rich beyond believe? I bend down, there is no gain without pain, haltingly extend my hand and hold.... Go! Go!...! Gold...! a Golfball. Well, one should not be immodest. The difference is only two letters between D and F.

We explore the wider and closer environment. Besides Gold, there are numerous mineral springs We decide to try to replenish our water supply and walk to Deep Spring. Already the first sip lets us know, that this is not for the likes of us. The water is heavily mineralised and better used for bathing in it. There are lovely forests, after all Creswick is the home of forestry, and hidden pools. Most of these have been artificially made in order to get enough water for the sluicing of gold. We discover a nest with black swans sitting on their eggs. A huge flock of white Corellas, white parrots with pink cheeks, fly over us while screeching as if their life dependet on it, which it probably does, since they warn from us

intruders. The birds here are very loud. The Kookaburra, who sort of increases his laughs into hysteria, the many screeching parrots, the first melodious then increasingly rody crawling of the black and white Magpies, the sulphurcrested white Cockatoos, the gray/pink Galahs, the emerald green, red and blue Rosellas and the yellowtailed black Cockatoos provide a constant musical background.

On January 1 we went to the Scottish Highland Games in Maryborough. It can compete with any of the Games in old Scotland. Pipes and Drum Bands, strong men who toss the caber, throw the sheaf over a 15m high bar, or heave heavy stones, up to 164 kg over a barrier. As a contrast elegant dancers who show the sword dance at its best. The very special Highlight of this day is the dancing on the drum. A little dancer sits on a huge drum which is lifted by two strong men and then held on their shoulders, while the pipes and drums begin and the little dancer shows a highland fling high above their heads, spectacular. We remember Ronnie, our Scottish friend on Stewart Island, who sadly deceased last June. He would have loved it.

Not far from here we find the Hanging Rock, a volcanic rock formation with large monoliths, deep cracks, dark caves and a rock which is held up and serves as a roof over the walkway. The place got its notoriety by the novel "Picnic at Hanging Rock" by Joan Lindsay, which was filmed in 1975 by Peter Weir. It tells of the disappearance of three schoolgirls and their math teacher on Valentines day 1900. Only one came back, but had lost all memories of what happened at the rock, the others remain unfound until this day. It is a magic place. The rocks have faces, some malevolent, some laughing, and some just stare at you. You will be able to read what happened to me there, at a later time.

Catastrophic Code Red – Bushfire!!

The sun is glaring mercilessly from a dark blue sky. The birds sit limply in the trees and breath through their open beaks. Nature strikes out. Not with rain, hail or inundation, no, with the most deadly hazard of all, with fire.

The temperature has been rising continuously over the last 4 days, from 40 to 41, 43 and 45 C. We are surrounded by gumtrees and Bush. Everything is tinder dry. The gumtrees shed their outer bark and drop their dry leaves. This results in a thick carpet which is ideal for a fire. The dry, sizzling hot wind comes directly from the fiery red heart of Australia. It unlocks the aromatic oils and fills the air with the smell of Eucalyptus. Extreme Fire Danger is declared for our region. Halls Gap, the Centre of the Grampians is evacuated, Campgrounds are closed, the National park is out of bounds. It is time to enforce our Bushfire plan.

We can hardly imagine what goes on here. Everyone is asked to listen to the local radio all day. Every half hour there is an update on the situation. At 11 o'clock a fire is seen in the farther vicinity. Should it come nearer to us, we would automatically be warned on our mobile telephone. The camping employees constantly sweep the dry leaves away and have rolled out waterhoses. The owner of the Campground is also fire chief for the area. He ensures us, that in case of extreme danger, the fire fighters will station a fire engine here, because the hydrant to refill them is on campground land. There is no use in leaving, meanwhile the whole state of Victoria is under

Code Red.

A hot desert wind blows with increasing force. A fire would spread over huge distances in no time and jump from tree to tree, while the dry undergrowth would explode in flames. Two weeks ago a town a little south from here at the seaside was burnt. About 40 houses were destroyed and there were deaths. Two years ago almost to the day, on Black Saturday, here in the Grampians many houses, people, harvests and cattle fell victim to a runaway bushfire. During our hikes we saw the black remains but also the green shoots coming out of the blackened stems.

The heat increases to 50.2 C and our aircondition cannot cope any longer it only cooles down to 35 C in the caravan. We drink huge amounts of water. Alcohol is deadly at this heat. We are on edge all day and listen to the wireless. We have implemented our fireplan. We packed the bare necessities, things like papers, medication etc. into a box. The chairs and table are already in the car. The fire in the vicinity has been put out and two others as well. Work which can produce sparks, like welding or sawing metal is forbidden. We stay close by and go to cool McDonalds to go to the internet. Slowly Clouds move in. This could be the biggest fire hazard of all. Lightning! Back at the campground we dive into the swimmingpool. This is also the Safe Area. A main road passes close by. It does not bear thinking what could happen, if a careless driver threw out a smouldering cigarette butt. An inferno could be the result.

Slowly night is closing in, the temperatures are still around 40C. So far there has no fire gotten out of control. For tomorrow there is a weather forecast of lower temperatures, towards lunch time a cool southwind is supposed to bring some rain. We still have Code Red, but the catastrophic danger is gone for the time being. Now Melbourne and the easterly parts of Victoria are threatened.

The rain came and the temperatures fell down to 16 C. We changed the aircondo to heating.

Gariwerd – The Grampians

We have explored the Grampians. That is a mountaineous Nationalpark which was developed Eons ago by Volcanic activities. We hiked for hours on end, over soft sandy paths, through shady Bush paths, over steep rocky inclines, up hot aluminium ladders and stony volcanic plateaus. On the hottest day this summer we explored the partially shady “Gran Canyon” only to find on top, that the way down did not have any shade at all and led over steep stony slopes. We were cooked by evening. On the other hand, we have glimpsed normally dry waterfalls, because we hiked on a day after a big rain. We have caught sight of wonderful things.

In free nature we have observed plenty of Wallabies and Kangaroos, a herd of Emus, colourful Cockatoos, a Wombat, a hare, a voracious Currawong, a 1.5 m long snake, various lizards and one blue tongue lizard. We had an unsurpassed experience when a wedge-tailed Eagle majestically soared above us. Maybe Bunjil? (read the paragraph on Aboriginies). Unfortunately most of the very shy animals disappeared before Beat was able to get his camera in position.

Aboriginal Rock Art

We have followed our special interest, the prehistoric Art. After having visited many sites in Europe, the oldest being 18'000 years old with the beautiful polychrome lifelike pictures in Southern France and Spain, or the younger rock gravings in Scandinavia and other prehistoric Art sites in Spain and Portugal, we wanted to know, what stories the up to 40'000 year old Aboriginal Art would tell us.

We have explored five rock shelters in the Grampians with Aboriginal Art. In the first we found Bunjil, the creator of the Universe with his two helpers, the dingoes. After he had finished his work, Bunjil metamorphosed into an eagle and can so still overview his works. In the other shelters we found lots of hands. Some of them are negative, some positive. The negative where made by the Artist holding his hand against the rock and then spray a mouthful of red ochre over it. We also found paintings of Kangaroo- Emu- and other animal tracks, but most of all, humans. They are mostly depicted as stick figures. There are hardly any animal pictures so far, same as in Scandinavia. The oldest paintings in Europe, however show mostly animals. On both, the European and Australian pictures one finds numerous graphic designs, which, as of now, have not been deciphered. Very intriguing contrasts and coincidences.

Latest scientific research has shown, that the dreamstories of the Aboriginies, their verbal historic lore, is in most cases based on true facts. For instance, one story tells of a huge object fallen from the sky, which built a large crater. The scientist have now found, that millions of years ago, before the emergence of humans, at the indicated place, actually a meteorite has fallen. The Aboriginies have already had a very good astronomical understanding tens of thousands of years ago.

The Aboriginies lived off the land, its fruits and animals and have rarely cultivated plants, or domesticated animals, with the exception of the dingoes. The Australian continent was so plentiful, that its inhabitants had plenty of time to tell their tales and construct their art work. Almost paradise, but certainly a sign of higher civilisation.

Spaziergang über den Baumwipfeln

Unser Weg nach Westen führte uns zuerst nach Süden. An einem eher kühlen Tag, wir haben die Faserpelzjacken und Regenjacken gut ertragen, haben wir uns aufgemacht um den Regenwald von oben zu betrachten. Nicht weit von Colac, unserem Standort im Vulkanland, führt ein Spaziergang durch einen gut erhaltenen alten Regenwald. So hat die Welt vor Millionen von Jahrenausede. Fast könnte man meine, die Saurier, denen wir unterwegs begegnen, seien lebendig. Wir feiern ein Wiedersehen mit den Farnbäumen. Ihre Kronen sind ca. 1.5 bis 2 m über Boden. Manchmal können wir gut auf sie herunter schauen. Wenn es aber an die Gummrees geht, die vielen verschiedenen Eukalyptusbäume, dann schauen wir bald einmal hinauf. Eine Art wächst pfeilgerade über einen Meter pro Jahr gen Himmel. Sie werden gut 50 m hoch. Da muss einem schon etwas einfallen, wenn man in diesen Wipfel spazieren gehen will. Und das haben die Initiatoren auch. Sie haben einen Hängepfad gebaut, der ständig höher und höher zu den Wipfeln führt. Zu Oberst sind wir fast 50 m über Boden und können übers Blätterdach schauen wie die Vögel. Wir wagen uns sogar ganz hinaus auf den frei schwingenden ca 25 m langen Arm und wiegen uns im Wind wie die Baumwipfel.

Walk over the treetops

Our way westwards leads us first a little southwards. We supported our warm jackets and rain gear well when we explored the rainforest from above. Not far from Colac, our camp in the volcanic region west of Melbourne we explore a million year old part of an ancient rainforest. This is how the world appeared millions of years ago. We could almost believe, that the dinosaurs, which we saw on our walk, are still alive. We enjoy the fern trees with their crowns about 1.5 to 2 m above ground. Sometimes we can look at them from above. As for the gumtrees, this is impossible we have to look up sometimes more than 50 m. Some of them grow straight as an arrow about one meter a year. One must have some ingenuity if one wants to look at them from above. The initiators of this walk have built a slowly inclining hanging walk which leads gradually up to the tops. There we are about 50m from the ground and can enjoy a view like the birds which flay around us. We even dare to go out on the 25 m long free hanging and swinging cantilever and move in the wind with the tree tops

How many Apostles are left?

When we came last to the Great Ocean Road, about 15 years ago, there were 12 as it is supposed to be. Meanwhile some of them have caved in and we only counted ten. Some dubious people keep talking about the Apokalypse now. Might this be a sign? The Apostles left are still very impressive.

The mighty Murray

Our intention was to go north towards the Flinders Ranges, when our travels crossed the Murray River. It was another of these sweltering hot days with strong winds straight from the furnace to the North. This time it also carried sand. No sooner had we installed our Caravan as the storm lashed out with all its might. We closed all openings hermetically and waited literally until the air was clear again.

The River Murray near Luxton is very impressive. It is the largest, but not the longest River in Australia. The Darling River has this privilege. The Murray resembles somewhat the Mississippi. Here also historical Paddle Steamer cruise majestically up and down. Our Camping is directly at the shore and we can go swimming daily in its 27C warm water without fear of crocodiles or sharks. The largest fish in the river are carp, an introduced species which is now regarded as a pest. Fishermen which catch one are told not to let it go into the river again. An ingenious company has started to produce dog food out of them, but not even that they can sell under the name carp.

The Murray twists and winds itself through a wide landscape. It has built lagoons, swamps and lots of side arms. The reason for this is to be found in an Aboriginal dreaming. It is rated M, for Mature Audience only. One day Ngurunderi travelled down the Murray in a bark canoe in search of his two wives which had run away from him as Pondi, a giant Murray Cod, swam ahead of him. He widened the small river with twists and sweeps of his tail. Ngurunderi chased the fish trying to spear it from his canoe. Finally Pondi escaped through the very narrow mouth of the Murray River to the Southern Ocean. It is not know, whether Ngurunderi has found his two runaway wives. We explore the river in the 100 year old paddle steamer PS Industry. The Steamer plied its trade along the river and transported goods to the far out stations on its banks from near Adelaide up to the vicinity of Sidney. The steamer was lovingly restored by a crew of volunteers and is also run by them. The whole crew including the captain and the two elderly kitchen ladies give their spare time so we can enjoy a cruise on the river. We even get hot tea and freshly baked scones out of the wooden stove, with jam and cream for afternoon tea. This I call civilised travelling!

We have lots of company on the campground. First we are called upon by some young Magpies which get a bit of old bred. Then the Noisy Menders, a bird we have not seen up to now, come in droves. Then the Kookaburras join the party. They are very tame. One of them flies to the back rest of beats chair. I can feed them by hand and they even let me touch them fleetingly. We have big respect from their large beaks but they behave well. Should we turn away, they would swiftly take away our dinner without qualms and laugh about it. The background music is supplied by the little Corellas, white parrots who screech as if their life was depending on it. The gray/pink Galahs and the other multicoloured parrots, Cockatoos and lorikeets are much quieter but are known to give an ear piercing whistle if a hawk flies over us. The Rainbow Lorikeets are most colourful. They have a blue head, yellow orange breast feathers, green wings and tail. They love the nectar of the gumtrees. In order to get them out of the flowers, they have a little brush on the tip of their tongue.

Australia Day

A long four day weekend for the Australian National day. We feared, that we would not find a free spot for camping, but this was totally unfounded. The Campground is half empty. We therefore also dare to go to the Rock on the River Festival on Saturday night. The Festival is organised for charity, namely to offer better conditions for the cancer patients in the local hospital, or course we are there. It is a friendly gathering alongside the Bank of the Murray with very good Rock-Bands. Everyone has brought their camping chairs and munches on one of the burgers or hotdogs sold here or even enjoys Pancakes with Vanilla Ice cream, Cream and Strawberries. Guess who had some? In between the Aquatic Club demonstrated their prowess on the Surf- and Kneeboards. They showed some astonishing stunts on the river. Waterski is apparently out.

On Australia Day, a free breakfast is offered in Luxton, accompanied by Music, Speeches etc. The only snag is the time. They start at 7 am, much ahead of our normal wake-up time, but we bite the bullet. It was well worth it. Fried eggs, bacon and sausages on bread, freshly cut fruit, home made fig- plum and orange preserves, orange juice, coffee, tea and Milo is on offer. What a feast. Everybody sits around on their camping chairs and enjoys the atmosphere. On this day all over Australia worthy people get honoured and receive praise and recognition for their work for the community. After the hoisting of the flag by the local scouts group the guests are called to the Pavilion and given their awards. They all have a more or less short recognition speech prepared. A lovely event.

We go back to the campground to have a little siesta and emulated the two herds of about 10 Kangaroos each, which live on the Campground. They doze in the shade of the large trees during the heat of the day and during night graze noisily around our caravan. They let us come very close and we can even watch a boxing match between two young males. Some of the females have Joeys in their pouches. One of them is cheekily hanging out of the pouch and grazes from a secure position.

In the evening we go an swim again in the Murray and watch ducks who swim around us, Cormorants who fly very low over our heads, Pelicans which land closely and the ever present loud Corellas. This is how it must have been in paradise.

A flat

No, not a flat white, as they call the milky coffee here, but the real thing. We just wanted to leave for the farmers market in the next village, when I spotted a flat tire on our Landcruiser. The first flat in our long car carrier! So far we have only had one flat, and this on a Harley and also in Australia. What is it with this continent that makes the tires go flat? It's probably the weight of all of Europe pressing on it from the opposite side of the world. What shall we do? The market closes at midday and we wanted to have breakfast there. Will we be in time? Should we call the Road Assistance? Nothing of the kind. Beat rolls up his sleeves and tackles the problem. With lots of success, as the pictures show.

We are Flexible!

We had planned to move to the Flinders Ranges which are another 600 km to the North and even hotter. We think that the normal 34 C with the periodic higher marks are enough, so we decide to move South to the Murray Mouth until it cooled off a bit up north. We want to see where Pondi has cut a breach for the Murray to the sea. The school holidays are over, so the beaches should not be so full any longer.

We plan to go the Lake Alexandrina, the delta of the great Murray River and there to go swimming again every day. The description of the Campground sounds promising. It is directly on the shore and there is a boat ramp, we ascertain this on Google Maps. Milang is a little town with a long history. It was the largest harbour on the lakes and provided shipping services up and down the Murray through the lakes to the sea and had a railway station close by to transport goods from and to the hinterland. The paddle steamers were built here. Lake Alexandrina is so large, that one cannot always see the opposite shore. It all sounds very promising and it is all true. But still, there is no swimming. No, no crocodiles, snakes or Sharks. But also no water! When we arrived we did see the lake, but due to lack of water over the decades, in large areas only about 50 cm deep. You can walk for miles in its shallow waters, but you cannot swim. The big hope here is now, that New South Wales will release some of the flood waters down the Murray from the torrential rains in January. The politicians have promised this for March. Water is here already a hot political item.

We console us with a swim in the Southern Ocean some kilometers farther south to Port Elliot. It is astounding how warm the water is, despite the fact, that the next land is Antarctica. In winter, the large whales come here to breed and make the little ones fit for survival in the rough polar seas. The Aborigines dreaming tell of Kondoli, a strong, big warrior and master of fire, who was invited to a gathering by a neighbouring clan. He went to the gathering and brought them his fire. Some young hotbloods were jealous and one shot an arrow at Kondoli. The arrow went deep into the neck of Kondoli and his fire came out in huge flames. Kondoli ran in to the water and a huge column of steam hissed out. Kondoli transformed into a huge southern right whale. From a far the blow of a whale does look like steam. Since Whales are mammals and therefore warm blooded and the flesh of a stranded whale is still warm, the belief of the fireman who became a whale, is continually reinforced. We did not see any whales, but were able to watch a number of sealions frolicking in the rolling waves off the Surf coast.

Culture

The Murray lured us to Mildura, the Arts and Filmfestival kept us there. We have found the, up to now, best Campground directly at the Murray, across from the landing place of the old Paddle Steamers. We were able to sit relaxed in front of our caravan and watch the steamers and houseboats cruise up and down the river while having breakfast in the shade. We arrived at a perfect time. Friday, the festival opened with the movie Bright Star which was opened by the producer Jan Chapman followed by an after film drinks and food party and we were part of it for only

AUD 10. The movie was very nice, beautiful costumes but not much action. A real Chick Flick. Saturday was Mardi Gras with a colourful carnival on the road. After dark there was a lovely parade of lighted boats, mostly paddle steamer on the river, followed by fireworks. No sooner was it dark again, our eyes were not yet fully adjusted, we heard a rustling sound in the leaves on the ground. Beat quickly got his pocket light out. And there they were, a whole family of sweet furry possums. They even let us touch them, but they wanted a little bread from us which we diligently provided.

The national Film Archive showed some Australian movies, some of which have not been seen for over 30 years. Wake in freight was lost for 40 years, the archive has restored it and showed it there. The movie plays in the outback, not far from Broken Hill. When it was shown first in 1971 it created a big scandal in Australia. We liked it. An open air concert of country singer Casey Chambers in the Perry Sandhills was the highlight of the festival. However, the much longed for rain plaid havoc with these plans. The parking space was one big swamp. 2500 tickets had already been sold and the organisers had to change venue within 20 hours. They have done a splendid job and found a large packing shed of the fruit coop. The owners cleared the shed, the organisers made a new parking concept, transported the tables, chairs and the catering for the Champagne crowd over and the rest of us brought their own chairs, food and drink. They had to advertise the change of venue via Radio, TV, Newspapers and big signs along the road. The evening was a full success. After the last raindrops we even saw a romantic sunset through the open walls.

Outback

Australia is full of Art, especially in the outback. Broken Hill presents from a far the impression of a bleak, gray, dirty mining town. Silver, Zinc, Lead and any amount of other valuable minerals and metals were found and mined. The landscape is arid and has fewer trees and is flatter than farther south. However, thanks to the rain in March, it rained three times the annual average in one day, it is all green. Broken Hill from up close, is full of life, and art. We have counted 20 Art galleries and visited a few. The most special is the one of Ando, who painted the world's largest panorama on canvas. Whether it is larger than the Murten Panorama in Switzerland I do not know, but this one portrays the outback excellently. On the hills behind the City a Sculpture Symposium has left sculptures of artists of many countries. They look very grand at sunset.

Of course we also visited the local base of the Royal Flying Doctors. They serve a huge terrain with very few inhabitants. Some people live more than a days travel away from the next hospital. The RFDS are very popular in Australia and everywhere people give donations. One of the artists in Broken Hill has asked us to deliver an umbrella which he has created himself, to the Hotel in White Cliffs. The umbrella is nailed up side down to the ceiling and people flip coins for the RFDS in. Of course we did this and promptly got a glass of beer for our pains.

We are on a quest for ancient Art and were lucky. A lot of the roads in the outback were closed due to the floods. The track to Mutawintji was re-opened on the day of our intended visit at 9 am. At 9.30 AM we were on the way following our Aborigine guide Smaka with our Troopy to the National Parc 130 km away on a gravel road in poor repair. Some places were still rather boggy and a brige was swept clear away, but our Troopy mastered it all very well. When we arrived at the gate to the historical site there was sudden hectic in Smakas car. After a while he came to us with red ears, he had forgotten the keys in town. Beat offered to lift the gate off the hinges, but Smaka would have gotten into difficulties. So, we packed some water and went on foot. Here we experienced for the first time the biggest plague in Australia, the flies. But, we were in scouts and prepared for all contingencies, so we donned the flynets over our heads, put our hats on top and were more or less protected. Flies

are the most obnoxious creatures here. They were probably created so that tourists think twice about staying in the country. Without flies it would be paradise.

Smaka has led us to an ancient meeting place of his people and explained some bush tucker to us. My favourites are the bush tomatoes. These are little red berries which really taste like tomatoes and are a bit sweet and a bit salty. They are very refreshing but to be eaten in moderation. Of course we heed this advice. Contrary to two explorers in the 1860s, Bourke and Wills. They have done just about everything wrong that can be done wrong. They were saved by Aborigines who gave them water and food. They showed the explorers how to make flour out of grass seeds with which they baked flat bread. After a while the Aborigines forbid them to use the seeds any longer. The explorers thought that the Aborigines wanted to use the seeds for themselves and continued to bake their bread. They died later of the consequences. The natives knew that the seeds would become poisonous after a certain date, instead of giving vitamin B to the body, they would deplete the body of this vitamin, thus inducing beriberi. Their own fault.

Here a bush tucker recipe:

Hunt an Emu, pull out the feathers and clean it out. Fill the cavity with nice smelling herbs like rosemary, lemongrass and other herbs and leaves. Then close the opening with a stick.

Meanwhile dig out a large pit, light a fire with Mulgawood, put some large stones and gumtree leaves on top. Now put the Emu in, cover it with leaves and its feathers. Some veggies can also be put in. Close up with stones and earth. Very important, make sure that the head of the Emu looks out of the pit. Now wait.

The biggest difficulty is to know when the Emu is cooked. Depending on the size of the bird it takes more or less long. The Aborigines have invented an infallible indicator. As soon as the meat is hot enough, the herbs in the stomach start to smoulder and smoke. The smoke then exits via the beak and viola the bird is done. With a kangaroo you would do likewise. However, you leave the fur on and you have to make sure that the behind looks out of the pit in order for the Aborigine kitchen clock to work.

Why the crow is black

In the dreamtime Eagle and Crow were looking for spouses. Crow had a sister and suggested to Eagle that he take her as his spouse. Eagle did agree and had two lovely sons. Crow now also wanted a spouse and pestered Eagle that he owed him a sister. Eagle had no sister and had to refuse. Crow was very disappointed and went away. He was waiting to take revenge. One day, when Eagle was out hunting, Crow came to the nest and killed the sons of Eagle. When Eagle came back, he knew right away what had happened but did not let on. He prepared for the burial of his sons and even asked Crow to help him. Crow came and asked what he could do. Eagle asked him to lie into the grave just so, that Eagle can be sure, that it is large enough for his sons. Crow willingly did as he was bid. No sooner was he lying down, did Eagle shovel back the earth into the grave and even put some stones on top. Crow begged and screeched to no avail. Then came a huge storm with thunder and lightning. One of the flashes hit the grave and spun the stones away. It was so hot in the grave, that Crow burned his feathers all black. Eagle soared high into the sky and laughed. Ever since then Crow is black, emits lamenting cries and does not fly so high any longer.

White Cliffs

We like the Outback and the little towns and hamlets in the hinterland. White Cliffs is a very small hamlet and has only 112 inhabitants of which 11 schoolchildren and Trillions of flies. The village would be totally without importance, if there were not some of most beautiful opals of the world. After White Cliffs the asphalted roads end and even that was closed for a while recently because of the floods. Thanks to them, the outback is now as green as the Garden of Eden. After 10 years of draught a whole generation of school kids has seen green grass for the first time in their life. As late as last year kangaroos, sheep and wild goats came into the village to forage in the small well protected gardens. Now the animals lie thick and fat in the shade and enjoy a snooze. White Cliffs looks like a pocked moon landscape. Around the houses there are hundreds smaller and bigger craters and hills of whitish stone, testimony to busy opal mining. Most inhabitants live under ground adjacent to their mines. The climate is very agreeable about 18 to 22 C despite the heat outside. Every fortnight a little truck comes with veggies, fruit and bread which are sold on the veranda of the hotel. The general store has a little meat and convenience food in the freezer and that's it. If people want more, they drive once a month over 300 km to Broken Hill to shop and fill their freezer.

The Campground is ok but has no shade and the water is not safe to drink. There are some rainwater containers which are full. We boil it since we do not have a waterfilter in the caravan. One of the first solar plants was built here in the 80s. It produced steam and then electricity and is now a museum piece.

On our way to Lake Perry we take gravel roads, tracks and barely visible station tracks. We traverse rivulets and smaller or bigger holes in the ground. After many years of lying dry the lake is filling up slowly and offers many birds a welcome oasis. Despite the heat I wear long trousers and long sleeved shirt in addition to that we wear our becoming fly nets over the head, otherwise you can't bear the flies. They try to crawl into every cavity on your face, ears, nose, mouth and eyes. I do not know what is so interesting in there.

We are most fascinated by the Opals. Almost each mine has a smaller or bigger shop where one can admire and buy the most beautiful pieces. For the first time we see a pineapple opal. They are called this because they look like little pineapple and are only found here in White Cliffs. Very special are also the fossil opal, mussels, fish, bones and opalised wood. Recently even an opalised skeleton of a dinosaur was found nearby. We treat ourselves to a cooling Spyder, a fizzy drink with some vanilla ice cream in it, in a little café in one of the mines. There we discover jewellery of Barbara Gasche, a German goldsmith, whose work has raised quite some attention in Europe in the seventies. She exhibited her work in Zurich Bellerive Museum and now lives in White Cliffs.

Easter

We are leaving White Cliffs and drive to Cobar, a copper/gold mining town with a huge open cut goldmine, then to Bourke, to see how the floods are coming down the rivers and ultimately heading for Lightning Ridge, the ultimate black Opal town, where we plan to spend Easter, floods permitting. We already know that the Kidman Highway is not passable beyond Bourke anymore and that the Easter Rodeo in Lightning Ridge has been cancelled, but we are hopeful that the roads there stay open a while longer. We wish you a lovely Easter holiday and will have the same, wherever we will end up.

Back o' Bourke

It is said: You don't know Australia until you know Bourke. This is where legends were born. Bourke has hosted more than its share of notorious Bushrangers. Part of the reason for this were the huge cattle stations which were created here in the pioneer days. The cattle king Kidman owned almost as much land as all of England and others were not much smaller. Bourke had a large harbour on the Darling. Wool, cotton and meat was shipped from here. In return the ships brought goods for the daily life in the outback. These were transported to the hinterland by 14 head oxteams and wagons or by Camel caravan. The Darling River was not very dependable. In one year it carried massive floods, other years during draughts it barely showed water and if, only in the occasional pool and in both times, steamers could not pass. The old bridge in Bourke stems from that time. Its access ramp was slightly curved. Rumour had it at the time, that this was necessary, because the publican nearby would not want to sell his pub around which the ramp curls. Far from it. The reason for the curve were the long oxteams which could not turn into a road at a right angle but gently had to turn along a curve.

We regaled ourselves with a happy hour beer in the pub. It was built in 1983 and is one of the oldest in the country. We sat elbow to elbow with workers from the environs. A cheeky one offered a little snake to me for stroking. Unfortunately I had to politely decline. Emboldened by his mate, another one invited me to participate in the bridge run. On the wall I saw a large blackboard with dozens of names of people who had done the run. The rules however, specified that you had to leave all your clothes except for your boots in front of the pub. Regrettably I had to put him off until New Year.

Several Outback poets wrote their stories and poems in and about Bourke and its inhabitants. When the railways came to Bourke and took over from the paddlesteamers, Ore, from Cobar, meat, cotton and wool was carted to Sydney or Adelaide. With the increasing wealth bushrangers and other larrikins were drawn to Bourke like moths to the light. One of them, Capt. Starlight as he called himself, son of a well to do family, and onetime student, robbed about everything which came into his sight. Once he came to the Pub, ordered a cask of their best brandy and had this distributed to the men present. Then he robbed the Pub, the Bank and a couple of other businesses. It needed men like Senior Sergeant Cleary who represented the Police in Bourke. He brought the Sullivan Gang and Thunderbolt to justice. Following the robbing of the Pub, Cleary went relentlessly after Capt. Starlight. After a lengthy chase Cleary caught up with Starlight in the Gundabooka Mountains. Starlight was hiding in a cave and was nearly dying of thirst. All he wanted was water and he would go docilely with Cleary. On the way back to Bourke Cleary and Starlight were in amiable conversation. Starlight was condemned to death and paroled on the day of execution. Later he was paroled and released from custody. He took a new name and started a career as impostor.

Another story pertains to Capt. Harry "Breaker" Morant, whose name was already familiar with me at home from a ballad. Harry Morant was the illegitimate son of an admiral who never acknowledged him. Harry tried to redeem himself in various areas. He was a bush poet and accomplished horseman and horse trainer. These talents enabled him to join the light cavallerie. He had many friends and drinking mates in Bourke, among others, the fellow poet Will Ogilvie. Harry served in South Africa with the Anzac during the Boer war. He and a fellow officer were accused of killing Boers. Both admitted to it but claimed, that they got their orders from high above (Lord Kitchener). As the world goes, the low get shot and the high get free. So it happened that Harry "Breaker" Morant got executed in South Africa.

Abdula Wade, or Wahid as he was called in his native Afghanistan, came to Australia with some camels in the 19th century. He established

himself as a transporter of all goods to all places and prospered quickly. He was one of the biggest employer of fellow Afghans in Bourke, albeit a very stingy one. Society ignored this conveniently since Abdula Wade had become quite prosperous and influential in politics. One day he accepted a wager, that he could ride 180 km to Wanaaring in 24 hours with his camel and be faster than a rider on a thoroughbred. Both started full force and arrived more or less at the same time in the prescribed time frame. But the horse died the same evening of exhaustion, while Abdul conveniently was able to ride his camel home the next day. Thus he proved his point. Abdul was always dressed in the latest London fashion. As he became older he yearned to go home to his native Afghanistan. He did so and left behind his Irish wife and nine children to fend for themselves.

There were also positive heroes like Fred Hollows. He noticed early that a lot of the children in the bush were blind. He took it as his call to help these children in Australia, Asia and Afrika. He died a couple of years ago and is buried in Bourke. His wife continues the campaign.

Our campground is a former orchard a beautiful setting on the darling river. It has two saltwater pools, flowers and green gras, not always granted in the red dusty Outback. But also this paradise has its serpent. Here it takes the form of Myriads of large black aggressive Mosquitoes. This is also a consequence of the recent floods. The Mozzies multiply exponentially and no icy winter stops them. I virtually hear them buzzing to each other: "Hey there is Siwss quality meat available, come to the feast!" Despite long sleeves, long trousers, tropical strength repellent it is no pleasure to sit outside of an evening.

We drive to the Gundabooka national park, not to look for traces of Capt. Starlight, but to search for more aboriginal rock art. The hills, you really cannot call them mountains, are lightly wooded rocky towards the summits. Large natural rock arenas invite for sitting down around a camp fire and thell tales. Aboriginees have done that for tens of thousand of years. The tribes invited every 3 to 4 years for a big gathering. Fast young men would be sent to neighbouring tribes carrying a communication staff legitimating them to bring the invitation. These tribes in turn would then send out other young men with the same message to the next tribes and so on. Thus tribes from great distances were appraised of the upcoming meeting. They sometimes were three or four months on their journey on foot to the designated place. On the way they would chase Emu, Kangaroo or other game. The women would collect berries, roots and grains into their wooden bowls called culemon to their evening camping place. They would sleep under rock promontories or in little huts made out of tree branches and covered with Mulgabbranches. These huts were very robust and would withstand major storms and rains. On the meeting place each family would build their own little village, go hunting and gathering and exchange news with the other tribes. Youths would be introduced to adulthood. This would include making a pledge to care for the land and preserve the resources. They would show that by making a pencilled copy of their hand on a rockwall. These hands and many other pictures of Emus, Kangaroos, people dancing, and many other subjects were painted in white, red or yellow ochre and overlay each other, the latest ones on top. These pictures all tell stories, but only very few are still known.

Marriages were the height of these meetings. Each Aboriginee belongs to one of seven totems. His is passed on from mother to child. Nobody may marry someone with the same Totem or the totem of his father. Even though tribes may live far apart from each other, this rule is adhered to today.

The traditional owner of the land, the Aboriginees, and the National Parks and Wildlife Society care jointly for the parks and the historical sites.

Lightning Ridge

Some of the floods in the Northeast of Australia are partially intentional and partially “too bad”. In December and January there were huge amounts of rainfall over most of Australia. Queensland and New South Wales had promised let some of the bounty flow downriver to Victoria and South Australia in March for a little consideration. After the 10 year draught they first wanted to fill their own reservoirs and catchment areas before they would let the rest go in a controlled way. Sorely needed water as we had seen on the Lake Alexandrina in South Australia in order to keep the mouth of the Murray open to the ocean, an uphill battle despite continual dredging.

Well, this was the plan. In March some huge rainfalls and tropical storms brought record waterlevels to Queensland and New South Wales. All of a sudden, those two states could not get rid of the water quick enough. Damage caused by the storms and the relentless flow of the waters from the north have damaged many roads in the outback. Many gravel Roads are so wet, that they have become impassable. If this coincides with bridges which have been destroyed, or huge pieces of asphalt and mud lie across the roads meter high, nothing goes any longer. The Newspapers, Radio and TV are not always very well informed and so it happened, that several towns on our intended route were purported to be closed off, even though they were perfectly accessible. We have to continuously call the Road- or Tourism Offices in order to know, whether we could proceed or needed to change our route. Bourke has complained to the authorities because they were supposed to be unreachable for a while and tourists stopped to come.

We are aiming for Lightning Ridge for the Easter festivities. Up to the last day we were uncertain whether this would be possible. Lorne station, our hosts, have assured us, that we could safely drive to them. They have 5 km of gravel road, but they have their own grader, so the road is well maintained. We were the first Easter guests and were able to choose our plot. There is plenty of action planned for Easter in Lightning Ridge. Goat Races, Horse Races Carnival and Music for one. Lorne Station have also arranged for bands here on Friday and Sunday evening. They have prepared large amounts of wood for the fire ring. The mosquitoes are still moderate and we went happily to sleep. The weather bureau talked about some isolated showers or thunderstorm with a temperature of 29C. But it rained cats and dogs almost all night and day with 19 C. Deep puddles formed very quickly and the way to the toilets over the red mud became an ice rink, only now skates were available. Not so bad, we had planned on an easy day anyway. We wanted to go shopping for victuals, but of course, the road to the village was also closed. Beat made an inventory of our reserves and found, that we could survive another two days without shopping. Hourly, Choppers cruised above our head to check the situation of the floodings. The Local Radio would like to hand out blood high pressure medication to the organising committee of the festivities because of the continual uncertainties. Will the highway from the south remain open? It is already closed towards the north since a couple of weeks. Large chunks of the road have been torn open and it is flooded with a fast moving torrent. Only when the water has gone, will they be able to repair the damage, in one or two months or so.

We keep listening to the local radio Opal FM. Super Music, professional jingles and a volunteer at the mike. He sometimes misses the switches or inadvertently blends out the eagerly awaited weather situation or news bulletin, which he receives from national radio. He consoles us with the upcoming 5 o'clock bulletin. Well, he just managed to broadcast the tail end of the weather forecast. He gives a short version: “Well yeah rain which was äähm not forecasted, a....nd we haven't reached maximal temperature of 29C today... ähm either, tomorrow it will be no different.” Then he progresses to the road situation which everybody is awaiting anxiously.

“Well, road x is ähm.....closed....., yes we all know that already. The Y road what is that now?..... I do not understand this.... I am sure there is nothing.... I think it is....ähm open. Ähm I think it is best...ähm that you cal the ähm, the öhm... councils you know? Council Offices. Do I have a Telephone numer? Nooo ... ähm it is in the book..... Yes they can give you much better information than I can.”

One has to know, that the offices close at 5 pm, so no road conditions tonight.

He says goodbye at 6 pm with: “ähm Have a good ähm evening and yea..... I know....ähm not exactly how it continues..... Well, there will be something... I better play some music now.”

Yowie, the spirit of death, and the Southern Cross.

Biami was the greatest of all spirits. His magic was very strong and he came to the earth. He made two men and one women out of the red clay of the Barwon river bank. He showed them which plants they should eat in order to keep fit. After a prolonged draught, these plants became very rare. One of the men killed a kangaroo and he and the woman ate the flesh. The other man did not want to eat meat. He left them and wandered to land of the black earth. The man and the woman closely followed him. There, weak from hunger, the man died under a large white gumtree. The man and the woman saw a huge spirit figure raise him up and drop him into the tree crown. The tree was lifted from the earth and passed into the sky, where the sky spirits lived.

As night fell, the two companions could no longer see the tree, but four gleaming eyes. Two of he eyes were those of the first man to die and the two others belonged to the Yowie, the spirit of death.

Two white cockatoos who lived in the tree were so spooked, that they also flew into the sky. They became the two pointer stars of the Southern Cross.

Back from the outback

We know, that we are out off he Outback because: there are large trees, we can get more TV Stations, we can use our mobile phone even in between towns, our car has no large red clumps under the fender any more, there are again McDonalds and other billboards and, most important of all:

There are no more swarms of Flies, Locust and only one or the other mozzie towards evening. We have now lived through 7 of the 10 biblical plagues. First the bushfires, then the torrential rains, the hails and floods, followed by the Mozzies, the locust and the frogs. Some of the mosquitoes are carriers of the Ross River or Dengue fever. The locust have eaten up whole huge fields of new crops. The Murray has not turned red, but was closed for bathers for a while due to Blue Algae Pest. Australias nature is widely untamed, archaic and unforgiving . Every day we learn better to live with it.

On the other hand, nature offers us many surprises. During a hike in the Warrumbungles we have seen our second Koala in free nature. He slept peacefully on his gumtree and just blinked at the camera with one eye. Barely 200m further we encountered a large Goanna crossing our path. Shortly thereafter we disturbed two herds of Kangaroos who were munching gras together with two Emus. A young Kangaroo, a Joey, still in mama’s pouch, mustered us interestedly and will soon hop around on its own little feet. A few days earlier, we were so lucky to see an

Echidna cross the road just before us. They resemble a hedgehog but have longer snouts, lay eggs but then give milk to their young, an animal which exists only in Australia. So far we have spotted over 60 different, sometimes colourful, birds. I think the Rainbow Lorikeets are the most beautiful.

There are lots of dogs on the campground and we got to know some very special breeds. One of them is the spoodle a cross between spaniel and poodle, or the Cavoodle a cross between a Cavalier King Charles and a Poodle. The most common is the Bitser. When I looked questioningly at the owner she smiled and said: You know, a bit of this, a bit of that...

Goondiwindi

The quite magical name has lured us to Goondiwindi. The Touri info told us, that there was hardly anything worth visiting in the neighbourhood, but that was the understatement of the year. Gundy was home to Gunsynd, the legendary gray race horse in the 1970s. He got the name from the Goondiwindi Syndicat which bought it of AUD 1500. Not only has Gunsynd won just about everything there was to be won, but he was a horse with a rare personality. When he heard the crowds on the stand applauding his success, he bowed once or twice in the direction of the spectators. He showed himself to all the photographers and pranced and preened himself until he was led away. He was the darling of the masses and even got a song which was a long time leading the top tens, he Goondiwindi Gray. Now there is a large statue in the middle of the village. Gundy is a cotton center with two cotton gins and lots of cotton fields, next to farming, wool and cattle. Our visit came at the most convenient time, it was Gundy Show time. Of course we went to the opening of the Art show with Champagne and warm and cold nibbles. The real show started the next day with Horse performances, cattle and sheep shows, and competitions in all agricultural categories. One of the wool judges showed us for what he looked in a Champion Merino fleece. The wool has to be very fine, finely crimped, strong, reasonably clean and long. In the afternoon we went to the shearing competition.. The shearers gave their best and were not only judged by the time per sheep, about 2 min, but also on the amount of cuts they inflicted on the wrinkled skin of the sheep. In between the rouseabouts or “razzers” as they are lovingly called, the wool handler, were also judged. A razzar has to take the freshly s cut fleece by its hindlegs and throw it in one flow flat on a table, headpiece at the far end, outside wool upside. Then the razzar takes away the dirty and felted pieces all around the fleece in a jiffy, throws these pieces on different piles, then the yellowish wool has to be eliminated and goes to a separate pile, the remaining white fleece is folded and put on yet another pile. In between the razzar has to make sure, that the workplace of the shearer is clean of wool and sweeps the remnants under the table. A Razzar serves two to three shearer. A good shearer manages about 130 sheep a day. They are paid be sheep. All in all, pretty hard work. We know this firsthand. We got to know a farmer at the show who invited us for a visit to his farm.

Sheep Station

Right after our arrival on Sunday afternoon, one hours drive away from Gundy over some dusty gravel roads, and even before we placed our caravan, we were on the way with Sue and Ian on their quads to muster sheep and bring them to the woolshed. Then they 407 yearlings got counted and separated by sex. Pedro, the sheepdog puppy has supported us enthusiastically. The first group of sheep was stabled in the woolshed for the night, so they would have dry wool in the morning. After tea/dinner we went hunting foxes. The sheep are in lambing season and there is nothing so tempting to a fox as a little lamb. Ian is a first rate marksman, he was a professional hunter in his younger days. Early next morning, before first light, our alarmclock woke us just after 6 o clock. The two hired shearers Tony and Todd wanted to start shearing at 730 and before the pens had to be filled with a first lot of sheep. Beat and I got taught the work of a razzar from scratch. I was even able to have

a go at shearing part of a sheep. After one and a half hours of sweat producing work it was smoko time with tea, sandwiches and homemade cake. The work was again interrupted by lunch and afternoon smoko. We have managed 220 sheep on the first day and we were knackered. Next day, same time, same program, only a bit faster. We wanted to be finished after lunch and did it. We pressed wool into bales, the shorn sheep were wormed and marked with a non-poisonous colour. Meanwhile black rain clouds threatened on the sky and again we were on the way on the quads like lightning to get another herd of sheep in. Sue drives a mean quad at all times, but this time she surpassed herself. These widders were shorn three weeks ago. Now the 37 heaviest should be chosen for the market on the morrow. We weighed the on electronic scales and I painstakingly marked the weight and the earmarks then the 37 heaviest were selected and the rest was let go to get some more meat on their ribs. Sue has marked the sheep with different coloured chalks and they meanwhile looked like Indians on the warpath.

Early next morning we loaded the sheep onto the Ute and a trailer and went 160 km to market. The weight of "Our" sheep was in the upper middle range and looked much cleaner than some of the other herds there. Ian and Sue take good care of their sheep and beef cattle and the can always bring first class animals to the markets. We followed the auctions with bated breath. The first sheep fetched about AUD 40 far from the expected AUD 100. But these sheep were rather small and scruffy. We kept all fingers crossed and, lo and behold, Ian got AUD 109 per sheep. He was happy with the price. Ian and Sue also keep beef cattle and farm grain crops in addition to the sheep. It is hard, but very satisfying work.

Thus our stage on the sheep station neared its end. An almost 40 year old dream had become true. Then, we dreamt of emigrating to New Zealand and have a sheepfarm there. Now we were able to experience how our lives would have looked, had we been able to fulfil our dream then. It is a good life. We have made new friendships, had super experiences and took very specialised new skills and knowledge and some muscle aches from the friendly sheep station. Tired but happy we left for the mountains to recuperate and slept 12 hours on the first night.

Sunshine Coast

Everyone and his uncle praise the sunshine and other coasts sky high, so, we go there. We pay attention that we do not hit the high rise and high price area and chose to go to Tin Can Bay, opposite Fraser Island. The village is small and a bit sleepy, even the sea is not at home when we arrive, but it will come back in a couple of hours. We are really lucky. Tin Can Bay is one of only two locations in Queensland where Dolphin feeding, under supervision, is allowed, albeit one has to be there already at 7 am. It is still rather cool, but Misty, head of the dolphin pod, is already there. Today he has left the rest of his family far out in the bay. He is a dolphin in third generation and come punctually every morning to the pier to play. Each dolphin gets only 3 kg of fish, about 10 % of his daily ration, the rest they hunt themselves in the sea. At 8 am the buffet opens. Everybody gets a little white bucket with some fish, walks into the water and gets Misty to eat the fish out of one's hand. Misty loves the attention. After about 20 min all the buckets are empty and are taken up to the kiosk. This is a signal for Misty, he quietly leaves the pier. Ciao see you tomorrow.

Fraser Island is known for its pristine beaches and archaic rainforest, its clear blue lakes and its Dingos. They live since thousands of years on the island and are the purest race Dingos on earth. Some years ago Fraser Island has been declared a national park and all not indigenous animals were banned. Among those, cows, goats, chicken and other animals. Now the darker side of this measure starts to show. The dingos do not find enough food anymore. The start to plunder the rubbish heaps of the hotels and campgrounds, but this is by far not enough. The

Dingos are slowly starving to death. Tourists are not allowed to feed the dogs, because they would otherwise become aggressive against humans. Meanwhile there are protest organisations which have taken up the case of the dingos and it is to be hoped, that the food situation will soon be improved.

The rainforest has many peculiar and very special trees and plants. One of the really imaginative plants is the strangler fig. Birds eat the fruit and then let their droppings with the seeds fall on top of some trees. There the fig starts growing downward with thin long arms until it reaches the ground. There it makes root and grows thick and fast winding its arms around the poor tree. The tree usually dies and leaves a shell of thick fig arms with some little windows into the empty interior, once the initial trunk is rotted away. The strangler fig builds thick buttresses like structures at the foot of the tree as stabilisers and looks quite bizarre. Between this baroque structures high, red Kauri Pines grow rod straight towards the sky.

Rainbow Beach

Rainbow Beach offers an attraction which can only be seen on foot from the beach. We started out and after a couple of hundred meters the way was almost blocked by water. We remembered, that the lady at the tour info told us that the beach was only open at low tide and was blocked at high tide. Now: is the tide coming or going? How high will she rise? How long until she recedes? If we continue, will we be trapped and if yes for how long? Questions upon questions, we simply ignore them and continue. Worse comes to worse, we can still wade barefoot back through the water. Soon we arrive at our destination, the coloured sands of rainbow beach. They are really worth all the peril and bother. From black to sandcoloured, to golden, to orange, to brown, silver, white and mauve, all in all there are 72 colours. We could have walked the whole 10 km along the cliffs, but it is time to go back. Will we have to swim? No, we were lucky. The tide had turned and was receding and we could walk back dry footed.

How the beach got its colours

Long before our time Murrawar, a beautiful maiden, lived by the river. She fell in love with Rainbow who visited her every day. One day, Burrawilla, a huge very bad man from another people came to the river kidnapped Murrawar. He took her as a slave, beat and abused her and had her doo all the heavy work. Meanwhile he was sitting in the shade and admired his killer boomerang. This boomerang was bigger than the biggest tree and full of devilish maliciousness. One day Murrawar decided to flee. She ran and when she looked back, she saw, that Burrawilla had thrown the killer boomerang after her. She called for help and fell into the sand. All of sudden she heard that huge earsplitting noise from the sky. Her faithful rainbow came to her rescue. The killer boomerang and the rainbow clashed with a thunderous clap. The boomerang dies on the spot and the poor rainbow lay shattered on the beach dying. His colours can still be seen on the cliffs.

Good bye beach

We have seen beautiful blue lagoons, golden sandbeaches bordered by dark lush rainforests, the dream of all fishermen, surfer and beachgoers. Since we do not belong to either, we will go back to the outback, we go bush.

Cape York

Laura is as far as we can go in direction of Cape York, the northernmost Cape of Australia. Laura is a small hamlet and lies on the only track to the Cape. All adventurers come through here. We see every kind of 4WD with or without tent trailers which go North. They all have one thing in common, their colours are still distinguishable. All cars coming back from the cape are Uni-coloured, red-brown dirt and dust, mostly up to the roof. The Off-Road Track leads over many river crossings, Rock levies, Mud holes and sand holes. Not only that, but the rivers are inhabited by the large fierce Crocodiles. Good that we stay in Laura.

The land belongs to Aborigine and the surrounding hills are full of rock art. Some of them are up to 34'000 years old, but we also see some newer ones which are only about 150 years old. One of them is sort of a cartoon. It shows a white policeman tumbling headlong from his horse. Others portray Quinkans, powerful good or evil spirits. Up to ca. 1970, Rock Art and adornments to Didgeridoos and tools, were the only expression of visual art by the Aborigines. Only thereafter they started to bring their dreams on paper, bark or canvas. Laura and Cooktown are our last stops at the Australian East Coast. From now on, we go west.

Water for everyone

This Aborigine tale tells of sharing

In the time of creation all living things were animals. The bluetongue lizard, Bangarra, was the only one who had water. All the other animals had to eat grass, when they were thirsty. One day the animals decided to ask Bangarra for some water. "What do you mean? I do not have any water, just like you" did he reply. "Your whiskers are all wet, how come?" Bangarra grumpily turned away. The other animals decided to follow Bangarra in order to find the hiding place of his water. They failed miserably, Bangarra discovered them everytime and went somewhere else. Until the smallest of the all, the mouse, Galu took up the pursuit. Bangarra was clever, but Galu was even cleverer. Every time the suspicious Bangarra turned around, little Galu quickly jumped over Bangarra's tail to the other side and so evaded detection. So Bangarra went to his waterhole and took away the covering stone. When Galu saw the water he squealed with joy: "Water, water for us all"! Alarmed by the racket the swallow came flying in and took beaks full of water and flew off the land. It created lots of lakes and rivers and all animals now had water. Bangarra was ashamed about his selfishness.

The dream castle

Beginning last century, a young Spaniard emigrated to Australia to find his luck. After hard labour on the sugar cane plantations he became wiser and started to buy and sell plantations. Once he had enough money, he went back to Spain to get his fiancée. Unfortunately she was already married to another, most likely because he never even wrote one single letter in the past 11 years. The family was rather embarrassed and gave him the younger daughter of his former bride for a wife. They went back to Australia. First he built a little cottage for him and the family before he started on his castle. He did most of the work himself, and built a castle with a large ballroom, which he used as Theater, Cinema and Partyroom. He planted hundreds of trees and shrubs to build a romantic garden with fountains, grand views to his waterfall and a summerhouse. He even dug out a tunnel to one of the waterfalls and wanted to have some exhibitions in there. He was so convinced of his scheme, that he built the ticket booth first. Only, the tunnel leaked and so it is inhabited by a tiny bat. The biggest achievement of the Spaniard, however, was his Hydropower Plant which he built into the large waterfall which adjoins the castle. He got the turbine out of Germany and, after some renovations works, still supplies enough power to run the whole park, including caravan park, restaurant and fancy lighting during the

evening show almost 100 years later. He never lived in his castle. Because he mixed too much sand into the cement, out of stinginess, the whole building leaks like a sieve. Two tropical cyclones added their part to the derelict state of the building and damages to the park. Nevertheless the visit to Peronella Park is special treat. Since some years it is owned by a family which cares again for the park and castle and the entry fees now cover the maintenance and some of the renovation costs.

Atherton Tablelands

I would have never thought, that the Swiss fog would follow us to Australia, but he did up tot he tablelands. The hilly landscape reminded us of Appenzell. Instead of Fir tress there are Fern trees, Palms and Gum Trees, but the hills are just as green as in Switzerland. Unfortunately it is also home to the fog center of Australia. But what do you expect from an area which is called Misty Hills. We stop in Ravenshoe, the highest town of Queensland, 920 m. The area is known through its tin and silver mines which have brought the wealth to the hills. The fog did not lift during our 5 days stay, but nevertheless we took the chance to see the widest waterfall of Australia, a huge Curtain Figtree and a water filled Vulcano crater, home of the elusive Cassowary, the third largest non flying bird of the world and almost extinct. The rainforest would be seriously endangered if this bird would die out. They swallow large fruit and nuts and pass the seeds whole through their system. They then germinated somewhere else and rejuvenate the forest

Undara tubes

Part of the great dividing ranges, the long drawn hills and mountains which border the east Coast of Australia, are actually dividing two large watersystems, and has been built buy volcanic actions. Early explorers were surprised, that the large rivers of the Murray and Darling System did not end in the east, but flow to the south. These ranges are the reason for that. The Vulcanoes were most active about 300 Mio years ago and they have left the unique Undara lava tubes behind. The last big outbreak was about 120 Mio years ago and lasted for 25 years. The glowing hot Magma was flowing rapidly downhill and the surfaces cooled quickly forming tubes, while the magma continued to flow under the surface for many years until the volcano stopped spewing and the tubes were not filled anylonger. The tubes were about ten to 15 m high and just as wide. On a lot of places the tubes caved in, but were they still exist they are inhabited by little glow worms, bats and some snakes.

On our way to the tubes we spied a little red knoll, with a splendid view over the surrounding landscape. After our visit, we camped on that knoll near a fireplace and enjoyed the best of camping with a campfire but no other signs of civilisation. The sky was never more brilliant than that night, without any light pollution, quite spectacular

Barrier Reef

We were looking forward with much anticipation to our visit to the Great Barrier Reef. Not because of the sharks or Crocs which are allegedly resident in the area, but because of an encounter with the only one of my world wide cousins whom I have not met yet. Capt'n Stefan has left his native Germany as seaman before he was twenty more than 40 years ago. He now lives in Shute Harbour in Australia. WE have passed some very agreeable and interesting days and evenings with Stefan. He knows plenty of storis and the time just flew by. We almost had to steal away time to to the Baarrier Reef. That was a fascinating day. After 2 hours on the boat through the picturesque Whithsujday Islands, we arrived at the hardy Reef. We Immediately donned wetsuits, snorkel and fins and floated effortlessly over the coral reefs. The Barrier Reef is the largest living body on earth and can be seen from outer space. Corals grow in a multitude of forms and colours. Some have hard calcite

hulls, other remain quite soft. Corals live in symbiosis with a minute creature, which gives colour to the corals. If the conditions for these creatures become suboptimal, i.e. water becomes too warm or cold, too much or not enough sunshine etc., they leave the corals and the corals in turn become grayish-white. If the adverse conditions continue, the corals starve to death.

We enjoy the hovering over this hidden waterworld and have company of many coloured fishes and 3 to 3 m long Groper and Trevally. I like the giant Venus Clams the best they are so colourful, green, purple or yellow veined, and also get their dye from these little creatures. On the way back from the reefs we were lucky to see a family of Humpback Wales majestically passing up North. They blow white steam fountains into the blue sky and playfully splash foaming white spray with their tails. They usually dive for about 7 minutes and then come up again to get air.

The shore is something else. The whole area looks like the Côte d'Azur or some other overpopulated European seaside. Each and every centimetre is built upon. There are shops with cheap souvenirs all over the place, tiny travel agencies try to hawk the tours to the Reef and other attractions with ostentatious handmade placards. We replenish our food supply and vanish again to the Outback.

Tropics

We have crossed the tropic of Capricorn at Longreach and are now officially in the Tropics. At first we are in the dry tropics and, since it is winter, it is pleasantly balmy and mostly sunny. But then, we slowly enter the wet tropics. Even though it is dry season, it rains or drizzles almost every day. We have a relative humidity of up to 99 % and 28 C. For the first time we have to dry our laundry in the dryer. Sweat runs off us in rivulets. Locals blame La Nina and apologise for the unusually bad weather.

On the positive side, we enjoy a very lush, green and dense rainforest. We have seen foxtail palms and corkscrew pandanus for the first time. They only grow here in Cooktown. The first trees are starting to flower, it will be spring soon. Golden Yellow flowers adorn the barren branches of the Kapoktrees and creamy white and yellow blooms show on a sort of Magnolia trees. Fantastic.

Dinosaur

Winton was the scene of a dinosaur stampede 65 mio years ago. Why do I know that? Well because I have seen the traces in the mud. Three different dinosaur species, small carnivores, middle sized herbivores and very large carnivores were all heading for the river to drink, when the big one came too close for comfort to the little and middle ones. They started fleeing away from the water with the big one in hot pursuit. Over 350 different animals left their traces in the mud and were identified. Not very far from the stampede lots of petrified bones were found. Since 1999 scientists have identified 5 so far unknown species of land dinosaurs. The largest was christened Matilda, a smaller one Banjo and another Clancy. New bones are found constantly and are prepared by volunteer lay workers which are periodically supervised by palaeontologists. The progress can be viewed in the preparations centre. In a few years the world wide largest dinosaur centre will be built here and put Winton on the world map.

Matilda Country

For most of us poetry is something which had to be endured during school time. Not so in the anglophile world, especially Australia. Local bush poets are highly revered, specially Lawrence and A. Banjo Patterson who lived and wrote in the middle of the 19th century. Banjo has written the unofficial Australian national anthem "Waltzing Matilda" which draws tears from every Australian abroad when he hears it. It is the

story of a swagman, drop out, who rest alongside a billabong, a little water pool with his Matilda, his rucksack. A jumbuck, a lamb, comes close and the swagman packs it in his tucker bag, his bag for provisions. There comes the squatte, a farmer, with three troopers, policemen, and wants to apprehend the swagman for theft of the lamb. He swagman wants to safe the only thing he got left, his freedom, jumps into the billabong and drowns. Banjo has written this song in Winton and the little outback town has dedicated a large modern museum solely to this song. The whole countryside is now named Matilda country.

Poetry is very popular in Australia. There are national bush poetry competitions. One of the judges and a colleague of hers are on our campground in Winton and every evening they give a different show in the corrugated iron shed. In the afternoon a nationally acclaimed country singer Graham Rodgers sings in the shed. He had a Nr. 1 hit in the country chats in Europe, USA and Australia. The spectators and us of course, laugh, applaud and stamp our feet in uproar. The artists are buskers, that means, we pay not entry fee, but the do a bush hat collection at the end of their show. People give according to their performance and the hat is very well filled each evening.

Outback wisdoms

We know we are in the Outback because:

More death kangaroos lie alongside the roads

53 m Roadtrains with 2 trailers overtake you on roads without hard shoulders

We are bombarded by huge clouds of locust and the highways are plastered with death insects

The stars seem much closer than in the cities

The wattle trees flower bright yellow and the bottlebrush shrubs have abundant red and pink flowers.

We have to check if the planned route is open to traffic or flooded.

People call me Sweetie, Doll or Deary

Most Campgrounds offer surprises like a campfire, Country singer or bush poet

We can free camp at the most beautiful spots and remain totally alone

Murphy's law

Too good to be true! We are now 6 months on the road and except for 2 flats, everything went smoothly. We had no problems with parking our Caravan in the Campgrounds, despite not having an electric Mover installed. Beat elegantly backs the caravan in every space, no matter how small. His fears were quite unfounded. We so far never felt the need for a generator. All Campgrounds provide electric power and water. Our batteries and gas supply even allow us to camp free for a couple of days. So, it was just a matter of time until Murphy would hit us with his unswerving truth: "if anything can go wrong, it will!" and he did it in Emerald, a mining town in the Outback. After our sporty experience in Carnarvon Gorge, we had to restock on victuals and diesel. Routine? Murphy decided otherwise. I happened to look out of the window of the troopy and yelled: "Beat STOPP!" and for once he obeyed immediately. The pump window already showed 10 l until we noticed, that today, Diesel has not been marked with a yellow but a black nozzle and Beat took gas instead of diesel. I swore very un-ladylike, I can, you know. My unconscious stores profanities like you would not believe. I just hope, nobody in the vicinity understands Swiss German. But now, what to do? Under no circumstances start the engine, so the attendant closed off our pump. It is almost 5 o'clock and the garages will soon close. We could not get a telephone number of the Toyota garage, they have changed their name to something very unlogic. Luckily it was not very far away,

so we sprinted there. Only to have to wait for the return of the chief mechanic who was on a test drive. Luckily our Troopy has two tanks and he gave us green light to drive with the untainted one to the garage. After cleaning out the polluted tank, two filters and AUD 234 we arrived one hour later at the Camp Ground. Uffffhh just scraped the Iceberg, get lost Murphy!!

Cooktown

Cooktown has completely thrown us. Most of the so called highlights on the Coast were either overflowed from the rich and beautiful or backbackers, Hippies and Australia-in 5-days tourists. That was reflected by the wares on sale: everything you never wanted and certainly did not need, but bought to punish your friends and neighbours with. Cooktown is the notable exception. The northernmost Town on the east coast which is reachable via bitumen road, has history and class. The township was initiated by Capt'n Cook in 1770 when he was hauled up here for 48 days to repair the damage on his ship "The Endeavour", which it got when running up on a reef outside Cape Tribulation. His memory is cherished up to today. The Cook Museum invites to an evening with film and theatre and nibbles. The film was made during a recent re-enactment of Cook's stay. In the intermission we are served with hot and cold tidbits and drinks to the hilt. Afterwards the cast reads from the various journals of the expedition. All this for a voluntary donation in the hat. 90 guests and us have enjoyed a royally entertaining evening.

Not far, by the Lions Den Hotel, a bush pub, we see the astonishing aquablue jade vine and the orange flowers and large round fruits of the canon ball tree. Enchanting.

In Cooktown we found the friendliest Campground yet. Mary and John are rue hosts. They care efficiently for all their guests, call us by name and organise each afternoon from 5 pm a happy hour on a long trestle table. Everyone brings their drinks and nibbles, cheeses, sometimes olives or sausage pieces are on the table. We are allowed to use their WIFI internet connection for a nominal fee. This is quite special, since Internet in Australia is very expensive and not easily accessible. Nothing is impossible. Mary has even given me her freshly bought fish, since I just missed the fish wagon. We really felt at home here and leave with a laden heart, but now we go west.

Mareeba

Once more we are glad for one of the little service towns. This time Mareeba on the Atherton Tablelands. We have had a little mishap on the road. An oncoming Caravan propelled a little rock into our windscreen and chipped it. "Watch out for rockfalls" has a complete different meaning here. Now every child here knows, that O'Brien will fix every chip with their special resin, since they are told so constantly on TV. Mareeba has an O'Brien affiliate and they are as good as their ads. They would have filled the chips right there and then. However, since one of them was in the visual field of the driver, this is not legal, so they changed the whole windscreen within an hour. We should do that more often. The sight is so much clearer. We wonder if the fog from a fortnight ago was due to a dirty windscreen? The best is, our insurance pays for the whole trouble. That's the way!

These little towns are magic. You can get everything, except for the one thing we actually came here for, the best pineapple worldwide. They are called Mareeba gold and are grown here. They are sweet and juicy without the sting which usually hurts your tongue. But none of the shops in town had them in stock. So we drove out to the plantation. It is the largest pineapple plantation of Australia. We have seen thousands of lovely ripe fruit from small to large highly stacked in crates, ready for transport to the markets. We wanted to buy two. First the friendly

employee wanted to give us two crates, but after a charm offensive, he was ready to part with just two individual fruits. We will eat one of them at our next overnight stay. We will go back to the magic freecamp we had near the Undara tubes and are looking forward to the campfire and the impressive starlit sky.

All bad things come in Threes

Murphy was smirking behind his little fist. Granted, he gradually introduced us to every more difficult tasks. First, a flat tyre in the campground, before we wanted to drive off. Then a flat with a blown tyre shredded to bits in the middle of nowhere on a natural road. And now, Third: A flat with a blown tyre shredded to bits on a lane country road with soft shoulders and the hooked on caravan. Needless to say, that we have also mastered this task with bravado. Secured the caravan with chocks, then unhitched it (note the sequence, we have learned). Then we lifted the troopy up with both jacks, defective tyre down, spare tyre on, hitch up the caravan, get the chocks from under the caravan!!!! and off we go again. Being in the outer Outback, there is no Cooper Representative within many hundreds of kilometres. The local gas stations in Croydon just shake their heads and recommend cheap Japanese tyres and doubt the quality of the Cooper Tyres. Slowly I also start to have questions on this subject. A new tyre every 10'000 km is a very costly thing particularly if they have 60'000km guaranteed. Well, the small print says, that the guarantee extends to Metropolitan areas only. What a feat, I have yet to see an off Road in a major City. Well, a garage in almost nearby Normanton, only 150 km, is willing to order the Cooper tyres upon our telephonic request. We will drive to Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria and hope, that the tyres will be in Normanton on our way back.

Outback stories

Croydon had its hayday end off the 19th century, when gold was discovered. Now it lives of cattle industry and tourism. Whoever read "A Town like Alice" by Nevil Shute or has seen the movie, knows what I am talking about. The little town works hard to keep its treasures in fettle. The old general store looks the same as a hundred years ago and still offers similar wares as then. As a special treat the owner has baked scones and colourful cup cakes. The whole village comes by and indulges. In front on the kerb we spot a pick-up with some cages with 6 large scruffy dogs. Two men in work clothes and visibly bush experienced, tinker in the hanger. On my question, what they would do with the dogs the one with the metal eyelet in his ear said: "Well, you know, we own a Chinese restaurant in Sydney..." full of fear I complement the sentence: "... and the dogs make you chop-suey?" "No, no" laughed the second guy. "We go on a pig hunt, and the dogs are trained on pigs." I sigh in relief.

Gulf of Carpentaria

Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria is well known for its prawn fleet and its marvellous sunsets. The campground prides itself as the friendliest on the gulf. Saturday evenings they invite all the campers to a free of charge fish B-B-Q at the camp kitchen area. We bring our plates and cutlery, something to drink salads and chairs. Raffle tickets are sold to benefit the little local hospital unit. They need a new oxygen unit, the raffles have almost got the necessary amount. More than 100 guests get generous portions of lovely bluenose tuna. After dinner there is music and entertainment from the campers and as special guest, the flying padre. He flies in once a month with his private plane, similar to the flying doctors. This time he brought his guitar and his daughter Viktoria who has a lovely singing voice. On Sunday he will preach in the little local church, followed by coffee and muffins. Whoever only wants to come to the muffins is also welcome.

Fishing is written with large capitals here. We almost feel a bit naked without a tinny on the car roof. In the afternoon, the caught fish are cleaned and packed into neat packages ready for the freezer. The ground behind the cleaning tables is thickly packed with fish scales. We just disregarded one fact. Fishermen go out before sunrise. Since some of them are already advanced in age and a bit hard of hearing, they let their alarm clock ring on high volume and for extended periods of time. The whole campground is awake before 6 am. Outside it is pitch dark, same under our duvets.

Karumba's biggest achievement is its daily sunset over the sea. One of the very few in all of Australia. Full of anticipation we, and everybody else, sit at the seashore in respectful distance of the water, because of the saltwater crocodiles. Nevertheless, a lot of the spectators have a large white paper bundle on their knees full with fish and chips to nibble accompanied by a stubby while they wait. The question then is: "Is it already beer o'clock?" the time honoured answer is: "It is always beer o'clock." The sun plays its part and disappears more or less spectacular under the horizon. A speciality which only appears in the Gulfs of Carpentaria and Mexico, I am told, are the tides. Normally there are four tides a day. Low and high tides change in a 6 hour rhythm, making it 4 changes in a 24 hour period. Not so here. In the Gulf of Carpentaria there is normally only 2 tides per day. The water needs approx. 16 hours to flow out and about 8 hours to flow back in. The reason for that is that the gulf is very shallow, narrow and reaches far into the land. Only very few days a year, mostly around Christmas, they have 4 tides but with very little change in water height.

We love fish and can fully indulge. Apart from bluenose Salmon, King Salmon and Prawns, Barramundi is "the" Australian fish. Barramundi is the aboriginal name for a large perch which can grow up to 1.8 m and become several hundred kilos. It is related to the Nile or Victoria Perch which is known in Europe. The name Barramundi is supposed to be protected so it can only be used for Australian perch. In Karumba has a large breeding station for Barra. Each year several hundred thousands of young fish are put into the surrounding freshwater lakes and rivers. Barra can live in fresh and saltwater. The breeding fish come back to the waters they were hatched or let free. At the beginning all the young fish are male, depending on demand, some of them later change into females. Normally the females can only get fertilised in salt water. Through a lucky coincidence the breeding station has discovered, that it is also possible in freshwater. During the large floods in the wet a couple of years ago, there was no more saltwater in the river and the station had only freshwater at disposal. They already thought that a whole generation of Barra was lost. When they cleaned out the large basins after a few months, they realised, that it was full of little fingerlings. They achieved something which scientists all over had tried in vain for years.

End of the tyre saga?

After the third flat we wanted to know what was going on. We went to a Cooper-Tyre specialist in Mount Isa. He briefly looked at the sorry carcass, called an employee, shoed him and said: "Ignorant!!" Apparently Cooper puts a metallic quality seal inside the tyres. Basically the tyres are tubeless, but because our Troopy has split rims they need a tube. The seal slowly grinds itself into the rubber tube and lets it burst if the seal is not taken out before the tyres are mounted., which is standard procedure, says the cooper specialist. None of the various garages which mounted our tyres new about that and left the damaging quality seals in the tyres. After some "discussions" the position of the garage which initially mounted our tyres in Melbourne changed from: "Well, lady I have never heard about such a thing. Did you check the tyre pressure?" Sure I did. To: „Ok we are ready to replace two tyres“. Let's see how this finally ends, I am working on it.

Worth a sin?

Actually we only wanted to get some food stuff. This time no fruit and veggies, because we will go over the border to the northern territories tomorrow and the importation of most fruits and vegs are forbidden because of possible contamination with pests. We innocently go about our business and think no evil, when Beat and I are hit almost simultaneously by tantalising vision. Pink, brown, yellow, white, big and small Donuts, filled with marmelade, vanillacreme, applesauce, nuts and cream, unfilled, long, thick, heart shaped, round, with a hole in the middle, with or without shiny sugar coating were obscenely lying there and the monsters crudely gesture us closer. They shine and glitter lure and tempt. We only wanted to peek and maybe, maybe buy one. No way. We did not reckon with the siren song of the Lorelei of the shopping centre. "Today, special, four for only 5 AUD". Yes, we really only want one each.." „That will cost you much more, take the four and save. " The magic word: save. Beat and I look at each other and nod almost imperceptibly. How can one withstand such an offer? Not in a million years of Sundays. After all, the economy has to be kept going and buy local is in. So, we chose the four best ones; no small ones nota bene. Together with a cup of tea with artificial sweetener (sensible I) and a cup of hot chocolate (Beat the gourmand) we admired our prey for a short moment and devoured it efficiently. A long one with shiny chocolate icing filled with strawberry preserve and cream and a white one filled with apple-rhubarb sauce (I) a round one filled with raspberry sauce and caramel coloured non filled one (Beat) disappeared in no time. Of course we overate royally. The positive side is: We were quickly finished with the shopping, there was simply nothing which appealed to us and more importantly: These malicious donuts can lure as much as they want, they will not get us a second time, we are healed. For the time being.

Electrical power

Not only tyres are good for a surprise, electrical power also has its merits. When I tried to prise the plug of our external electrical lead out of the socket in the caravan, it resisted with a vengeance. All my pulling and tearing was of no avail. Beat had to bring the heavy troops. He came with a crowbar. Finally a screwdriver did the job and finally the plug gave and came out. Albeit with one tooth missing. The socket had partially melted and entrapped one tooth. No fuse was the wiser and luckily there was no fire. As always in the Outback, this was no problem. An electrician, who just wanted to go on a fishing vacation with his selfmade houseboat, agreed to fix us up in his back shed. New plug, new socket, no worries, Mate.

Northern Territories – The Outback State

Northern Territories is the most auster state in Australia. Maybe this is so, because the Territories are not yet a State, but are still administered by Canberra. We notice. The roads are that bit rougher than elsewhere, the rest areas rarely have a toilet, the pic-nic places have often none or only just one table and the distances between the roadhouses or villages get longer and longer and the Pubs more bizarre by the km. For hundreds of kilometre there is no radio reception even on the main road, the Stuart Highway, same for Telephone or TC. The hospitality increases and so does the maximal speed limit on the one lane overland roads. 130 km/h are allowed on one lane roads with frazzled edges, soft shoulders, no emergency lane but deep rain ditches. Policemen on TV are always terribly astonished, when they have another accident with rolled over cars and even deaths even though there is hardly any traffic.

Devils Marbles

We take a short excursion south on the Stuart Highway to the Devils Marbles. Huge rock balls are stacked upon each other. Some look like Cheeses and that is also their name, others build high towers and bridges. They are million years old remainders which have been shaped by erosion through wind, sand and water. At least, this is the view of us Europeans. The Aborigines see their country with different eyes. They see their supermarket, pharmacy and hardwarestore in the land. For them everything lives or has lived. Country. Trees, flowers, grasses, animals they all have something to do with their history. The Devils Marbles are the signs of passing of a mighty devil who made a hairbelt while he strolled over the country. He dropped tangled hairballs and also spit on the ground, this has formed the Marbles. The common denominator between both cultures is the knowledge, the marbles are the most beautiful at sunrise and sunset. They slowly change colour from light brown to red to mauve. We stay two days in the National Park to enjoy this wonderful transformation. Simply stunning. Each evening we get the visit of a wild Dingo. He comes just so close, that the beams of our torches reach him, but that we cannot take a good photograph. It is the last time for a while, that we can free camp. It will get much hotter and much more humid farther up north, so that we need electricity to run the aircondo at night.

Katherine Gorge

Moving north again we stop in Mataranke at the bitter springs and stayed a few days. Paradise must have looked like this. From deep in the earth warm, cristal clear water at a constant 33 C comes up to a pool and then flows gently down towards the next river. The water is sapphire blue and just as translucent as the precious stone. The water current is rather strong and we let us drift downstream through a sunlit panorama with Pandanus Palms, Bamboo, Mangroves and other tropical plants. We enjoy the slow cruise through the garden Eden, accompanied from fireflies and colourful small birds which chase insects. Unfortunately every paradise has its snake. This one comes in form of sandflies. I look like a pincushion and itch all over for several days, almost not to be borne.

We explore Katherine Gorge via boat It is safe this way. We do see two crocodile traps which are empty, but a 4.5 m large male Salty was caught just a couple of days ago. Once caught, they are transported to a Croc farm where they are treated very well, fed plenty of chicken and then given a one way ticket to Paris to handbag heaven. Now in the dry, the gorge is not full of water. We have to change the boat three times and walk over large rock obstructions. We stop at some Aboriginal rock paintings which tell of the richness of the rivers. Longneck Turtles, Barramundi, Crocodiles and the cheeky Mullet are depicted. The cheeky Mullet got his name because he is the only fish which, when taken from the hook, can quietly flap himself back to the water. That is why it is shown with its head severed. It is safe to swim on the upper parts of the river and we enjoy the cooling off. The salties cannot climb over the rock barriers during the dry season.

Kakadu National Park

We expect the park to resemble the Everglades or the Okefenokee swamp in Florida. Dark rainforest, Mangroves, huge vines, swamps with little waterways, crocodiles and exotic birds. In addition the world famous aborigine rock paintings. Not bl... likely! FAR from it. Already the drive towards the park gives food for thought. Savanna and single trees, light green ponds and lakes with lotus flowers and water lillies, and red earth with a lot of dust. No change when we enter the park. Three large rivers which are all called Alligator river, flow through the park. Not even the park info centre caters for our imagination, well, we better discard it then and accept the reality. The park is owned by the Aborigines but is run jointly with the governmental park services. At the world heritage rock art sites at Ubirr and Nourlangie, Park ranger give informative talks

at the various sites. They explain the paintings, the country, the life of the Aborigines, their culture and way of living and their way to see the country. We follow the ranger from early in the morning to midday, then there is a break until late in the afternoon because of the heat. We learn a lot of new things and start slowly to understand, the way Aborigines look at the country. They do not see themselves as the owner of the land but its caretaker. The country is the mother and giver of all things. Many places and formations have their own story and are sacred. The land and its trees, rocks, animals plants and rivers are alive and are sometimes resting places for mighty and big creator beings. From Ubirr we can see the seat of thunder and lightning in the rock formation on the near Mountains. This formation is not to be disturbed on penalty of very harsh punishment for the whole country. Unimaginable disaster could befall the land. The same is true for the resting place of the rainbow serpent in the nearby Katherine Gorge. Earthquakes, floods and other disasters could come over mankind if it is disturbed. On the other side of the seat of thunder and lightning the Aborigines have declared an area as unhealthy since time immemorial. Nobody is allowed to go there. Today it is known, that one of the largest Uranium sites lies there. A French consortium offered the owner clan 3 billion dollars for the right to open a mine there, they declined. Country has another significance for Aborigines and can not be bought with money.

The Rainbow Serpent on family life

Most Aborigine children are well behaved and there is very good reason for that. They belong to a large family clan with parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, Grandparents etc. Children are never alone and they have always somebody who is responsible for them. If that person neglects its responsibility, he is severely punished. Sometimes with far reaching consequences, as this story from the dreamtime shows.

A clan has put up camp near a river and the resting place of the Rainbow Serpent. The adults are busy with their individual tasks. Women were braiding mats out of dyed pandanus leaves and chatted happily away. The men were busy fiddling with their boomerangs. The children are building a fishtrap in the river out of river stones and were licking on a honey flower. Everything seems honky dory until a baby started to cry. It is not known whether he was hungry or a teeth wanted to grow. The men thought, that this is women's business, the women had delegated the baby sitting to the elder children, and the children frolicked in the river and did not hear a thing. The Baby cried louder and louder, the men talked about their latest hunting exploits, the women chatted a bit louder and the children briefly listened to the wind and then continued to play. Then, the rainbow serpent slowly started to wake up. She opened one eye, then the other. She was extremely upset and angry. The Baby screamed and screamed, then the rainbow serpent blew the top. She got up, swallowed the baby and most of the negligent clan. Then it was eerily quiet and she got to sleep again.

Crocodiles

Not all of the Kakadu National Park is dry and dusty. The East Alligator river normally flows towards the sea. However, at high tide, it flows upstream and floods the only road crossing at Cahills Crossing into Arnhemland. Arnhemland is Aborigine land can only be entered with a permit. This is a novum for Aussies, since they have no other border for which they need to have a permit. The tidal floodwater and the normal river flow meet and flood the crossing. In no time the water mounts up to 1.4 m. This is the time when the large saltwater crocodiles move upstream over the crossing. They swim with large open mouth and elegantly displayed front paw over the crossing and immediately turn into the flood. They wait. Fishing is strictly forbidden at Cahill Crossing, therefore there are a number of fisherman doing just that. A large truck and a Troopy make it through the fast current. The water is only 70 cm over the road, but quite torrential. A heavy vehicle can still manage. The crocs are still on the prowl. All of a sudden one of them moves and with the speed of lightning catches a large fish. It devours it in three gulps and

comes back to the waiting predators. Today the menu is only fish. But they also had people; homo sapiens fisher and homo sapiens driver when a driver overestimated his skills and the weight of his car and was drifted off the causeway. The title picture of today's Newspaper shows a small rubber dinghy heavily loaded with six fat bum tourists sitting on the rim in the Alligator River and hanging enticingly low over the water. We have seen a large croc there two days ago. A Croc can easily jump 3 m out of the water and swims with about 35 km/h no was to escape for humans swimming. People can be soooo dummmm! No joking with nature here.

Darwin

Meanwhile we know what it means to live in the tropics. It is at present not overly hot, about 34 to 36 C but humid between 70 and 99 %. Most of all, the temperature does not fall below 25 C at night and the humidity stays the same, just as in a Sauna. Here, Aircondo is a must for us. Since Kakadu, we need electricity and therefore have to go into Caravanparks. In Jabiru, in the Kakadu Ntl Park we even had our own shower and Toilet right next to the caravan. Really luxurious. Nice, but not really necessary. We chose the Campground closest to Darwin City. It is close to the airport, and RAAF airfield. Luckily, they only start mid morning for their patrol flights over the northern waters to protect the Australian border. We have a couple of things to deal with here. I have passed my quarterly medical check and all is well. We will visit our friend Brigitte Weber in Vietnam in October and had to get a visa, flight tickets, passport fotos for the Visa etc. We will then be in Broome, but the flights will go from Darwin. This poses a slight problem. The inland flights Broome Darwin Broome, cost considerably more than the two flights Darwin Ho-Chi-Minh City Darwin, plus the inland flight goes at impossible tomes, so we have to stay over in Darwin for a night. We will manage.

Because Darwin has everything one needs, Beat very timely decides to get a tooth infection. This gives us the opportunity to visit a super modern Dentist clinic. The x-rays are directly transmitted to a screen and Beat can watch TV during the whole operation and tooth extraction. He gets some antibiotics and painkillers, gauze balls to put into the whole and a list with 6 points on what to do and what not. He should rest and not over exercise, to which he takes like fish to water. With so much care he is already much better.

We are interested in the role Darwin played in the second World War. Before our visit we did not know, that Darwin had been bombed 64 times by the Japanese in 1942 and a lot of people in the Territories had to be evacuated. We see here the pacific side of WWII What the war and numerous other disasters did not achieve, was accomplished by tropical cyclone Tracy in 1974. It laid 80 % of Darwin in ruins. The remnants of the old City Hall is preserved as a war memorial in the middle of the City.

Spring is in the air and it should still be dry. However, it rained quite heavily the last two days and has shown us how it would be to live here in the wet. Much hotter and just as humid. The predictions are, that an early and heavy monsoon and cyclone season should be expected. There were heavy rainfalls again in the south of the country and Victoria is getting a gladly expected drenching in areas where the 12 years drought has finally been broken. In Birdsville the famous races had to be cancelled for the first time in 100 years because of flooding. About 3000 guests who had already arrived were stranded for 5 days, before they could drive out again. The welcome rainfalls in the South mean also, that a huge locust plague is in the making. The farmers have counted 10'000 Locust larvae per m² earth in some areas. Some farmers have already seen clouds of locust measuring 3 km times 9 km. They will eat the whole lovely grain crop which has finally grown after the big drought. The Spray Planes are flying non-stop over the infected areas in order to get rid of that plague. The locust follow an epic mice plague of never seen proportions. The little rodents ate the seeds as fast as it was brought out. Whole areas looked like moving gray earth.

Termites

On the way from Darwin southwards, we stopped at some magnetic Termite mounds. They are not really magnetic, but are exactly aligned from west to East. Termites are tremendously interesting little insects. A lot of times they are referred to as white ants, which is wrong. Termites are mostly white because they live underground and in the dark, but they are not ants. They related to cockroaches and are highly organised. They have a queen, workers and soldiers and are very specialised. Some of the eat grass, others seeds and again others eat woods. Some of them live under the ground and have only very small mounds above ground, then there are the pancake termites whose big mounds resemble a very messy stack of pancakes and can grow up to two meters in height and across. Then, there are the megalomaniacs who build mounds up to 6 m in high and... the magnetic termites. These are mostly in wetlands in full sunshine. The mounds are very wide but shallow and look like a triangle from the wide side. The present theory of the scientists is, that the termites build their mound for ambient control. They are on the cool side in the west in the morning and then change over to the east side in the evening, when the sun is over the yardarm. Because they build in marshes and wetlands they cannot go underground when it gets hot. Other termites have intricate tunnels underground and only come above ground at night. Their mounds are sequestered in small chambers which are filled with their preferred food. If someone damages a mound, the worker termites repair it immediately. The mounds are made out of sand, grass and saliva and are very hard. In the Pioneer days the first settlers ground the material and mixed it with water into a fine cement and used this for the hard and durable floor of their houses. Aborigine revere the termites and sometimes use the material of their mounds as medicine against diarrhoea. Some clans have entombed high standing elders in termite mounds. The termites have covered their body immediately and shortly after, nothing more was seen of it. The termite mounds can be as old as 150 years and older.

Kimberleys

We have a lot planned in the Kimberleys, a series of hills in the North of W.A. The landscape is dotted with large Boab or Bottle trees. They grow very slowly and can get a huge bottle night trunk. Some of them are hollow and can be easily inhabited. First we drive to the neighbourhood of the Bungles Bungles or Purnululu as they are known to the Aborigines. The outstanding features of the Bungles are the so called bee hives. These are rounded cone shaped hills out of sandstone which have been formed by Glaciers, Water, Wind and the sun for millions of years. The outer layer has oxidised a dark red brown. In between there are thin horizontal layers which have coloured dark red on the outside. This gives the Bungles their typical beehive look. It is not so humid anymore as in Darwin, but all the hotter for it. We shun no effort and discomfort to show you the most beautiful pictures to you in your comfortable chairs back home. We get up at 4 am!!!, so that we can start walking after having driven the 120 km of corrugated dirt road and do some of the way in the relative cool of the morning. The road, is a bit rough at the end of the season, but well manageable with our Troopy 4x4. Only the thing with the cool in the morning was a bit of bummer. At 8 am the thermometer already showed 30C and rising. Undaunted, we start our walk to the Cathedral Gorge and after one hour are rewarded at the end with a large round rock arena complete with a cool pool in the middle. The second hike led to the Echidna Chasm, a very narrow and high rock cleft. We hope that we will have some shade in the gorge. There is some shade, but the whole way leads through the riverbed over rocks and large pebbles. It takes it all out on us. At the end of the way there are some ladders to climb and then to sidle between large boulders and the rock wall to the end of the chasm. We saw some remainders of the long ago rainforest which existed here when it covered most of the land here millions of years ago. After the rocky drive back home, we were really knackered.

Nothing could hold us back the next morning to drive with our caravan to the next highlight of the Kimberleys, the Wolfe Creed Meteorite

Crater. This crater is more than 300'000 years old and the second largest in the world, after the one in Arizona. It was discovered in 1947 by white explorers. At the time of impact, the approximately 50'000 ton meteorite has mostly gotten up in a plume of steam and dust, but small pieces of it were found in 4 km distance. What remains today is a large crater with a diameter of 85, which once was 120 m deep. Only 20 m depth remain, since nature has slowly filled it with sand etc. On some places the glass like surfaces can still be seen on some rocks, which were caused by the enormous forces and heat. In normal years the landscape is gray, brown and dusty, however, since it rained a couple of times last winter everything is in various shades of green. The view on the crater rim is spectacular, we see far over the flat country at the edge of the great sandy desert and nature is very still. We only hear the rustling of a Lizard and the wind in the tall grasses. Before you ask, yes we also got up at 4 am and drove 100 km over ratty, corrugated dirt road.

Next we wanted to drive a little of the legendary and notorious Gibb river road, because of the adventure, you understand? But with so many things, they are not what they seem at first. On the East entry the road is mostly sealed or at least well graded to a smooth country highway, same at the West End. Remains the piece in the middle which supposedly still was wild, but that was too far for a day trip. We did not want to pull our poor caravan over that.

After all, we had some more destinations so see in the Kimberleys, the Windjana Gorge and the Tunnel Creek out of Fitzroy Crossing. You know the routine, getting up at 4 Am, start the long drive 100 km over corrugated roads to our destination. The high steep rock walls of Windjana Gorge early in the morning gave wonderful shade. We walked along the riverbank way up into the gorge. Bizarre rock formations surprised us. The gorge is part of a million years old reef, called the Devonian Reef. Where the sea at the time was flowing far into the Australian continent, we can now admire prehistoric fossilised sea creatures in the ancient sandstone. Soon we spy the first Freshwater Crocodiles which are sunning themselves at the other shore of the river. Willy Wagtails, nervous little fantails, hover around us in order to get the insects which we stir from the ground. We are lucky, that colony of fruit bats is also on the other side of the river, because they make a terrible racket and we can smell them even from afar.

Our second destination for the day, Tunnel Creek is a subterranean river, which has eaten through the reef and now flows in a large tunnel, through which we intend to walk. Over 100 years ago an Aborigine tracker was shot here. He was a fugitive and lived for 3 years in the tunnel. Originally he was an excellent stockman and even better marksman and worked many years as tracker for the police. Settlers had started bringing their cattle into his clans lands and took away the food sources for many of the animals the aborigines hunted. When pressed for hunger, they shot some of the cattle of the settlers. When loyalty of the tracker to his clan was tested, he chose the clan and shot a policeman in order to free his clans chefs. We knew, that there was some water in the tunnel and that it is pitch dark, so we took our spotlighting flash light. In the parking ground we met a Swiss couple, which just came back from the tunnel and they told us, that the water came up over their knees. No problem we decided to don our bathing suits, we always carry them in the car. Even though.... Australia is surrounded by water, but you can hardly ever swim in it. Either it is too cold, the surf is too high, the cliffs too steep, or the water is not deep enough and murky, full of sharks, Crocs or stingers and sea lice. If this is not enough, there are some beaches which were closed because of e.coli bacteria, last seen in Darwin. For days there were speculations about how this could have happened and people were told to really clean up after their dogs on the beach. Until a very pragmatic gentlemen reminded everyone that large portions of Darwin's sewage was still flowing into the sea untreated. That's the way it goes... Enough of that, we started off with bathers, bathing shoes, torch, camera, knapsack and sunhat to conquer tunnel creek. The

entry to the tunnel was blocked by huge rocks and boulders. Up and down these rocks did not pose a problem for long legged people. Since I am rather vertically challenged it was a bit more tedious, all the more since the rocks were burning hot from the glaring sun. I had to wiggle and waggle and really watch out, that my derriere did not get fried on them. Almost at the entry, we had one last huge boulder to surmount. Beat, as the true explorer that he is, manly took the lead and climbed to the left of the boulder and into the dark, wet abyss. He disappeared up to his chest in cold, dark water. Uttering a few obscenities, he held the camera and the knapsack above his head and did another step. He sank another 30 cm, but after a few more steps, the water got shallower and he reached a sandbank. For me, there was nothing else, but to jump right in and swim. On the sandbank, I looked back and saw, that, should we had chosen to pass the boulder on the right side, we would have only had to brave ankle deep water. We heroically warned a family with a small kid which came after us, to not do the same mistake and then went on into the pitch dark tunnel. We had to wade through some more water, but none as deep as the first. In the shine of the torch, we saw and stalactites hanging from cathedral high vaulted ceilings. The tunnel was interrupted by a cave in which allowed some light and thousands of bats into the tunnel. They hung from the ceiling and were rather restless. Then, again dark as Hades. At the end of the tunnel we came to a little idyllic sun flooded wooded where we met some tourists who had gone ahead of us. They asked us: "Have you seen the crocodiles?" I thought they made a joke. On the way back we saw two fresh Croc tracks in the light of the torch which led to one of the pools we had to cross. Beat shone the light over the water and lo and behold, we saw 4 orange spots gleaming in the dark and then disappearing under water. We crossed the pools with mixed feelings, even though we knew, that Freshies are evading human contact, if they can.... Well, I could not resist to go swimming one last time in the last of the pools before braving the heat of the afternoon outside. It was very refreshing. Swimming with Crocodiles is now crossed off the bucket list.

Indian Ocean

We have arrived in Broome, at the Indian Ocean, and wonder over wonder, we get a camping spot at the only campground directly on the beach. And more wonder, despite Mangroves there is a beautiful sandy beach which is presently free of jelly fish, Salty Crocodiles, does have not Algae and no bacteria, so it is fit for swimming. There is just a little setback. Broome has a tide of about 12 m and when we arrive, there is no water for kilometers on end. It has gone out and we have to wait until 10 pm, when it comes back splashing on the beach. Next morning at 10 am, it is here again and beautifully aqua blue and inviting. We take it up immediately and enjoy the balmy water, a really rare treat. Soon the stingers will be back and on the other side of the peninsula on the famous cable beach, there was a visiting croc which had that beach closed for almost a week. Sadly, Malcolm Douglas the ultimate Crocodile man who became world famous with his documentaries on the Kimberleys and who live here in Broome, had a freak fatal accident in September in his wilderness park here. He wanted to stop his rolling heavy Toyota, opened the door and tried to pull the hand break, when the car hit a big tree sideways and squeezed him against the metallic door frame. Malcolm would have caught that croc in no time!

In Roebuck bay, where we are, we can walk far out at really low tides and see the Catalina flying boats which were bombed by the Japanese in WWII while sitting on the ground, full with women and children who should have been evacuated. The allies had misjudged the reach of the Japanese airplanes and it Broome was considered safe from airstrikes. During winter and at full moon and low ebb, a phenomenon, called the stairways to the moon can be seen. The ascending moon throws a way of light over the mud planes and make it look like shimmering stairs to heaven.

Broome is the centre of pearling in Australia. The beautiful white-pink, champagne coloured, gold and silver-white pearls are grown here. In the olden days last century, the large mussels were harvested for their mother of pearl in the shell. It was used to produce buttons, salt spoons, furniture inlays, jewellery cases etc. The large South Sea pearls were just a nice extra. Meanwhile the mussels Pinctada Maxima, are now farmed locally. They inserted with a little mother of pearl seed and then hopefully grows a lovely pearl around it. This takes about two years. Sometimes, the mussel rejects the implant, but still produces a pearl. However, these Keshi pearls are not round, but have all kind of bizarre forms. Some of them are flat, look like boomerangs, triangles or little sausages. After two years and the first harvest, the mussels are implanted another seed. Only few of them can produce a second pearl, but these are then much bigger and dearer, because also the Pinctada Maxima is older and bigger. Meanwhile the mussel meat has become very popular, especially in Japan and the mother of pearl is still used for evening dress buttons and other luxury goods.

We are in luck and the nesting period for the huge marine turtles has begun. We have seen lots of tracks on the beach and followed them at night. There we detected huge flatback turtles shovelling out their large nests in order to be able to lay their eggs and then cover them carefully. In February all hatchlings of one nest will all appear at the same time and speedily waddle towards the sea. There they remain for decades until, one November evening, they will return to their birth beach to burrow their eggs in turn to create another generation.

The greedy turtle – a story told by aborigines

Gubil, the lazy turtle enviously watched Julian, the dolphin catching fish after fish and feeding in seeming easiness. Gubil went to Jilanyi, the large snake who was connected to the people in the bay and asked him for help. Jilanyi agreed and together they built a large fish trap in the bay. The trap is very effective and Gubil can gorge on fish every day and leaves nothing for Julian the dolphin. Gubil gets fatter and fatter and one day cannot move any longer because he was such a glutton. No he repents his greediness and he turns himself into a large red sand dune. This is still visible on Cable beach just in front of a natural stony Amphitheater.

Vietnam

For visa technical reasons we had to leave Australia for a short while and decided to visit are long term friend Brigitte Weber and her street kids in Vietnam. Other than a few short term stop overs in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, we have never been in Asia and were in thrilled anticipation of what would await us. All we knew was, that Vietnam is a communist country and that we would receive our entry Visa at arrival in Saigon. And so it was. After one hour wait and under sinister scrutiny, we did receive the visa after a very capitalistic USD 50. Nothing has changed in the real socialism. Brigitte waited for us outside and then accompanied us to a lovely, little very reasonably priced hotel smack in the centre of Saigon. We had everything our hearts desired. Bath/toilet, mini bar, telephone, air condo, sumptuous breakfast and free internet (something you have to look for in Australia with a magnifying glass) for just USD 45 per day and room. Brigitte has been living in Vietnam for 15 years and has dedicated their time to street kids and so called “fallen women”. They go to regular school, learn English, get fed and counselled. They are all entrepreneurs and have their own little businesses as shoe shiners, lottery ticket sellers or sellers of other goods or seamstresses for one of Brigitte’s projects. They are very smart. For some of them Brigitte and her team have found apprenticeships. We visited two of them who worked as waiters in a good restaurants. They were very professional and charming; they certainly will make their way.

What we noted immediately in Vietnam was, that the people laugh and smile a lot and have an abundance of charm and really enjoy it if you

try a couple of Vietnamese words. From the first until the almost last meal we ate Vietnamese cuisine. For me it is, the best Asiatic cuisine. Beat and I have gone to a half day cookery course in a small prime restaurant and learned some of the basic things about Vietnamese cooking. We managed to cook a 4 course lunch there.

All this sounds very orderly and civilised, and that is what is basically is, except for the traffic. Saigon has large boulevards, a left over from the French, and they are full. Full with Scooters, Vespas, Motorcycles and the odd bicycle. Everything on two wheels builds an amorphous mass. The swarms curve around the taxis and very rare private cars in Saigon. Foreigners without a local driving licence are forbidden to drive, but most of the expats have at least a scooter to go around Saigon. To traverse a road as a pedestrian is difficult and complex endeavour. Even when the lights turn green, one does not step forward immediately, because there is always a couple of people in a hurry, who just drive over the red light. It looks like this: A large mob of two wheelers are nervously waiting for the green light, eight abreast and about ten rows deep, revving their engines like the starting line at a formula 1 race and vying for the pole position. At green, there is no stopping any longer. They explode over the crossing like the fireworks at New Years, regardless of the latecomers on the crossing. The best example was the car driver who careened at full speed over the red light, wildly gesticulating and using the horn with the other hand (who steered?) willing the oncoming traffic to let him through. Honking belongs to the good manners, it advises the others and serves as warning: "Here I come!" Nobody waits for pedestrians. After a few feeble attempts at crossing, we got behind the secret. One has to wait until the swarm has thinned a little and then has to step confidently forward and not hesitate on the way. All the while one has to scrutinize the oncoming two wheelers with a keen eye. Normally they gage their and our course correctly, but every now and then there is the odd weirdo who phones with his mobile or talks to the family behind him on the scooter, or simply is in the clouds. Scooters are THE traffic vehicles per se. Everything is transported on them Huge sack full of straw, bags with rice, the whole 4 headed family, fodder for the beasts and even 30 to 40 live geese wildly chattering in their baskets. Even two large live pigs, which are tied across the backseat. Young women very often wear long elegant gloves as if going to a ball. They do not want to get brown from the sun and also wear face masks because of the bad air and smog. There is no limit to the imagination in the helmets. They come in all colours and forms. Some of them look like ladies hats at the races complete with a bow on the side. Very rarely we see private cars, but then they are VW's, Beemers, Mercedes and the odd Bentley or Rolls Royce. Show offs. We have not seen one traffic accident during the ten days we were in Vietnam, so the chaotic system must work somehow.

We had to get used to a new currency and became instant millionaires. One Million Vietnamese Dong is about SFr. Or USD 50. Basically everything, except luxury goods, is much, much cheaper than what we are used to. We eat like kings for 350'000 to 500'000 dong, and have spent barely USD 18 to 25. Beat had his shoes cleaned for a horrendous 20'000 Dong (USD 1) by a clever little shoeshine boy. The normal rate is between 5'000 to 10'000 Dong. Of course I had some clothes made here. I am now the proud owner of a very elegant silk ensemble which waits for a formal outing. Keep this in mind when we see each other again and invite me to an elegant do.

We fled chaotic Saigon and went to the Mekong delta for three day a cruise on the Cochinchine 4. The large, traditional wooden ship has 16 cabins with ensembles on two decks, plus a sundeck on the roof. A crew of eight plus the Captain and our guide Tri were solely responsible for the well being of Beat and myself. We were the only passengers and felt like VIP's we got the state cabin and every wish was read from our eyes. This was an absolute necessity, since the crew did not speak one word of English or French. Meanwhile I mastered 12 words of Vietnamese and this had to suffice for the beginning. We undertook several outings with the little wooden dinghy, on foot or on bicycle. We

visited one of the hundreds mud brick factories alongside the Mekong, some other home factories producing rice paper or Coconut chewy toffee, fish farms, rice paddies, orchards and swimming and other markets, traditional old houses and temples. Of course we tried all the produce right there; the best fruit we have eaten for a long while. In the markets we see small fish for sale. Vietnamese buy them young and small (cheaper) and then take them home to their pond to fatten up for the next feast. When the bicycle outing was starting, I passed and let Beat go alone. I stayed on the Cochinchine with the rest of the crew and we started on an English/Vietnamese lesson. We elaborated a catalogue of words which could be of use to the guest and the crew on the ship alike. I then put it into English, French and German and Tri added the Vietnamese words. The crew now has a little vocabulary on easily usable sheets where tourists and the crew can point out some important needs, offers or wishes and understand each other. The cruise was paradise. The Chef cooked 4 and 5 course Vietnamese meals every lunch and dinner in an absolute 5 star quality, using fresh produce he got in the mornings from the markets or gardens along the river. As a dessert he always sent up fresh fruit of the finest, everything ripe, succulent juicy and sweet.

Only on the Mekong did we realise what it really means if one talks about a river being the live blood of a region. Everything is transported on the river. There is almost as much traffic as on the boulevards of Saigon. The river offers food, fish and plants like the water hyacinths which are partially eaten. But also used for building, same with the water coconut. Houses in Villages usually have a rather derelict front to the river and then a spruced up version to the street. We have seen shacks out of corrugated iron, houses with traditional palm leave walls and roof, mud brick houses, but also villas with lots of marbles and impressive columns, everything surrounded by a little garden, with a pond, some chucks and for sure a little fiercely barking dog. Everything surrounded by a dense jungle of Palms, Vines and other tropical plants. It is hotter and more humid than in Saigon, but we always have a welcome cool breeze when the Cochinchine is in motion. In the cabins we luckily have Aircondo.

Back in Saigon we go to the zoo again where we feed the elephants with sugar cane and watch an Orang Utang being lovingly shampooed, showered towelled, a feat which he visibly enjoys and contributes to it with loudly splashing Water around. As a contrast we go to the posh café in the Petro Vietnam Tower, where the rich and beautiful meet. We were here once before with Brigitte and the waiters recognise us immediately. They try out their English on us, and I my Vietnamese on them. Immediately the younger of the two points to about 10 things and gives me the Vietnamese names. He keeps testing me relentlessly and remorselessly on these words until I can memorise a few. Now I know already about 20 words and it is time to say good bye. We have met a lovable country and its charming people which will persist and prosper. We fly back to Australia with almost sad feelings. Hen gap lai (see you again).

The Pilbara

The mining operations are all present in Western Australia. This is one of the richest land in the country. But also one of the most expensive. Port Hedland is one of the large shipping harbours for Iron ore and Salt. Salt is produced right there in huge paddy fields and waits in large white heaps to be transported to all our tables. Iron ore is dug out of the earth in many larger and smaller mines.

It is impossible not to notice the mining activities. The majority of the vehicles on the road have yellow safety strips, a little orange flag on a high pole and the number of the mine where it is allowed to enter. There are a lot of posh new houses and they all have these cars in the car port. There is an air conditioned shopping centre which provides for the essentials, but no frills, there are no other shops on a high street to speak

of. Clearly a men's world. The majority of the shoppers, men or women, wear the orange or yellow and blue safety clothes of the mines. Everybody knows everybody else and banter goes back and forth in the parking lot.

We are enjoying the sea adjacent to our campground. We have to cross two dunes to reach it and this is a bit of an obstacle. The sand is so hot, it burns our toes through the Crocs we are wearing and we sort of dance as nimble footed as we can to the cooling waters.

Dampier Peninsula is not only home of the largest distribution facilities for natural gas in Australia, it is also host to one of the largest Art Galleries in the world. Thousands of Petroglyphs, Aborigine drawings engraved in Rock adorn the rocky outcrops, some of them 30'000 to 40'000 years old. As a lot of things in W.A. which are not mine related, these rock engravings are treated a bit shabbily. We have to rely on a hand drawn mudmap in order to find them. There are no Road or other signs pointing the way, so we can quietly enjoy these magic sites all alone unencumbered by other tourists.

Mining

We are visiting the largest single Open-Cut Iron Ore Mine in the world, the Whaleback Mine of BHP Billiton. The mine is 5. Km long and at present 28 benches deep. Ultimately it will be 44 benches deep, each bench measuring 15 m in height. Already now it is mined below the water table. Each week 80 million litres of water are pumped out of the mine and used for various tasks in the process of the iron ore. The huge ore trucks can transport up to 240 t iron ore. If they are fully loaded, they weigh 75 t more than a fully loaded Jumbo Jet at take-off! Tyres can measure up to 3.5 m in diameter, last 9 to 12 months and cost about AUD 40'000 a piece. The high graded Iron Ore is mixed with some lesser ore before loaded onto the trains. Officially this is to guarantee a continuous quality to the clients; unofficially, this way, the mining company can sell its lesser or at the same time. Each day seven trains get filled with approx. 42'000 Million tons of Iron ore each. These trains are about 3.5 km long and are pulled and pushed by 6 locomotives. These Locs are linked with each other. The whole train only needs one driver. It reaches up to 75 km/h and uses 3.5 km to come to a complete standstill. It is not a good idea to drive over a crossing, when the red light blinks. 7 of those trains fill one of large transporting ships in the harbour 90 % go to China, about 10 % to Japan and Korea. The longest train they had was over 7 km long, pulled by 8 Engines, driven by one single driver and carried 100'000 tons of Iron ore. This train went for 875 m.

Newman is fully owned by BHP Billiton, Tom Price is owned by Rio Tinto. The houses, the ground and businesses are either owned by the mining companies or depend heavily on them. There is no competition and the prices for everything are sky high. Rents for a house can go up to AUD 2'800 per week! A normal person cannot afford these prices, only mining companies do. Often times the local shops are operated by spouses of mining employees, others are hard pressed to be able to afford the prices. Until 10 years ago, Newman and Tom Price were privately owned cities. Meanwhile the administration has been given over to the shire for the price of AUD 1. The community employees, the policemen, doctors and nurses etc. have difficulties to find affordable living quarters, even though they are paid better here than in the urban centres. For the first time since many years there will be building ground available, 12 lots, a little drop on a hot stone. No wonder, that a number of workers, some with their families, live on the campground in bungalows or in their own vans, even though the rates are also top dollar. There are so called Congas on the Campground which have 4 rooms with Shower, Toilet, TV and Aircondo, which are rented by workers. For AUD 70 per day, they can have two hot meals and a cold lunch box to take to work from a cafeteria on the grounds. The mines work in two shifts at 12.5 hours a day or night. The locals work two days day-and two days night-shift, then have 2 days off. The fly-in, fly-out people work

7 day-the 7 night-shifts and then have 7 days off. They are then flown back and forth to wherever they live on the continent by the mining companies. The mining companies pay top salaries and provide for schools, leisure activities such as golf courses, sports facilities, swimming pools and cinemas etc, in order to make it bearable for the employees to live in the arid and hostile environment.

Mines are constantly changed or amended. Sometimes the whole Mining Camp has to be transported somewhere else, not to speak of the huge mining machinery. We are very used to the large Roadtrains, but these relocations are something else. These extraordinary Transporters carry loads 8 to 9 m wide and 35 m long. The transports are escorted by street pilots. One or two pilots ride in front, and one or two in the back of such a transport. The whole road is closed until the transport has passed. We have to drive onto the soft shoulder and stop for the duration. We don't mind, we have never seen such a spectacle. Instinctively I lower my head while the huge front loader passes by, only centimetres away from us. One of the pilots told us, that every now and then cars try to overtake such a transport. It is simply not possible, there is no road left to overtake or pass. If possible, the transports drive into a lay by in order to let the traffic pass. The transports drive from sunrise to sunset with short breaks at roadhouses, if possible. The pilots and road train drivers sleep in their transports. Some of the pilots have chosen small mobile homes as their vehicle. More and more women take this profession and are well accepted in this rough men's world

Karijinni National Park

The second largest National Park from W.A. lies in the midst of the iron ore country. Some concessions to mining had also been made here and some of the richest parts had been excluded from the park. The Pilbara belongs to the oldest parts of the earth. 3600 Million years ago, the first landmasses were built by volcanic activities. The sea which covered them, were bare of all hard boned or shelled sea animals or plants. Therefore no ammonites or other fossils can be found in the hard and densely packed sandstone. The individual layers, all about 5 to 10 thick are clearly visible and differently coloured, depending on the minerals they were exposed to. Immense pressure from the south has folded up the rocks. Erosion, water, glaciers and wind have built deep serrated gorges and steep waterfalls. We even find some blue green billabongs which beckon us to swim; a lovely cool off at 40 C at 9 AM. After lunch we are usually back in the air-conditioned caravan for a Siesta. Later in the afternoon we emerge and take our drinks outside. We share with Galahs, Corellas and Pigeons. Especially the Galahs are cheeky. They fly up to and sit on without hesitation in order to get assume bread crumbs. I notice that even Galahs are hot and have warm feet.

The birdworld is set on trumping this. On the next caravan Park, large black Ravens come very close. One even eats out of my hand and lets me stroke its neck. It is very thin and scrawny under the brilliant blue black plumage. He soon retreats; because even he has to declare defeat when.... loudly booming curious Emus enter our plot. I quickly get up and look eye to eye into large orange eyes of these ancient birds with their inquisitive gaze. Their large beaks come very close, but they remain absolutely friendly. The Emus pass by every day and sometimes sit down majestically in the shade of our tree to doze a little in the heat of the day.

Our Troopy has airconditioning, of course; Well, most times. Only when we would need it most, it collapses. As soon as we pull the caravan and the ambient temperature together with a hot wind moves up to unthinkable heights, the aircondo flops. The Toyota guy tells us, that this is normal for the Troopy. Well, we do it as the chooks do, we not only get up with the sun when we go walking, but also when we travel on in order to enjoy cool of an early mornings.

Coral Coast

What we were seeking at the East Coast with no success exists here in the West in abundance; beautiful, remote and lonely, white sandy beaches, with a fringe of shady trees and crystal clear, turquoise blue balmy waters. And Imagine, we can even swim in them. We are below the Croc line. Here are only small Riff Sharks and no (not yet) poisonous marine stingers. At the East Coast we had to pay dear for a boats tour to the reefs. Here they are free and only few meters from the shore away, wonderful Coral Reefs to snorkel and dive. We swim with gigantic maritime turtles and colourful tropical fish over green, brown and blue large Venus mussels and every kind of Corals there are. We see stag horns with light ice blue points, massive round, yellow boulder like corals, such which resemble large mushrooms huge cabbages or small cauliflower. Some of them have sulphur yellow , deep purple or light green rims. Small orange rays with blue dots hover over the sand and large, over 1 m long silvery blue fish are nosy and come very close for a good look. We forget the time and float happily over this world of wonders. However, the world at large has not forgotten us, especially the sun. Even though we have heaps of sunscreen all over us, I get a funny feeling towards evening. I sit on hot coals. Beat checks and is stunned. He declares me as belonging to the Pavian tribe. He swears, he could have sizzled an egg on my sore behind. Only soothing lotions and gels can help. Sitting is out. I lie on my belly and let the cooling draft of the Aircondo do its best. In the future I will only go snorkelling with shorts. Well, we should have known, no paradise without its snake!

Floods

In January 2010 we were surrounded by bushfires and could not get evacuated anymore. Luckily it rained just in time to put the fires out. Now, it rains like cats and dogs. Carnarvon got 21 cm within 24 hours, that is more than the normal full year quota. The next day it rained another 10 cm. A cyclone hit the coast far more southerly than usual and dropped its wet load directly over Carnarvon. The whole town was flooded and we had a little lake around our caravan. Nothing to worry about, most of the water was gone by the end of the day. The next day was Beat's Birthday and we planned to go out for dinner and have a yummy seafood buffet. Well, that was the plan. As it goes with a lot of plans, they are for the dogs. Late in the morning we got called for a meeting in the caravan park topic: Evacuation of the park because of an impending flash flood from the Gascoyne river. The new plan was, to go to the civic centre in town, get meals from the red cross and sleep with hundreds of people in large hall. Not a good plan to any standards, certainly not for me. We relocated just in time to a caravan park which lies on the highest ground in Carnarvon, before the police closed the road. Read on in my Diary of the flood evacuation.

Diary of an emergency flood evacuation

Day 1, December 18, 2010

Annoyance that our well planned routine is interrupted. Beat's Birthday dinner outing down the drain. Being torn back and forth between obeying the evacuation orders to go to the Civic Centre in town or going to the Capricorn Holiday Park which lies higher than the town but will not have power nor water and no access to supplies, once the road is closed. We pack and unpack, plan and un-plan; a very unsettling time. All the while it is humid, hot, sweaty and drizzly. Once we decide to go to the Capricorn Park, we start to calm down and it feels almost like the aftermath of shock. We join the other viewers and watch the road from high above in expectance of the spectacle to come. The floods should come at around 6 pm. We keep waiting until 8 pm, but no water. Instead there is a wildly flashing police car on the road, turning back all cars driving towards the waters, wanting to escape the inevitable. Beat cooks a lovely dinner with fresh pink emperor, caught the day before off the Carnarvon Coast. We still have electricity and water when we go to sleep.

Day 2, December 19, 2010

We wake up to a gray morning but still have power and water. The floods started at 3 am and have now claimed the road and all the low lying ground. The Petrol station across the road has about 1 m of water on their forecourt. The road to the Campground looks like a boat ramp. We explore the rest of the caravan park and discover that there is plenty of room even higher up, should the waters really threaten us. The peak should reach us at about 9 pm. We will have a social gathering at the BBQ and Camp Kitchen at 4 pm to keep the spirits up (sic!). Helicopters swoop above us. We hope for Julia Gillard (Australia's Prime Minister) to visit us, but with our luck it will be Colin Barnett....(W.A. Prime Minister). We plan for trips with a tinny (little boat) to town. At present it is still too dangerous. Orders for beer and maybe wine for the ladies are high on everybody's mind. In addition to that we would like to get some butter, the only thing we forgot to buy. In Ohio people are said to watch the buns rise on an uneventful Sunday. Here we watch the water rise and dig ourselves in for a prolonged siege of a week, up to Christmas.

We hear on the radio, that the water supply will be cut and fill any possible container. Steve, the camping manager complains vehemently to the responsible officials and tell them that we are 50 people and about 15 dogs who would not have drinking water, toilets nor showers, so they keep the water running. The electricity is gone for good. No more TV, Aircondo and Microwave (no worries), loading of PC's and Telephone. The Fridge is turned to gas; the lights and the radio draw on our leisure battery. The water is rising rapidly and runs like a wild mountain torrent down the highway It now reaches the flower border on the incline to the Caravan Park. We go to sleep with some trepidation.

Day 3, December 20, 2010

We are rudely awakened at 4 am by loud knocking on the door. The water has broken through the plantation in the back and has now flooded the Campground manager's house. We get ready to pull out and drive to higher ground on the hill. At first light, 6 am we all drive up two meters higher, then we watch with horror, as the waters rise above all expectations. The brand new 800'000 AUD house across the road which is build quite high, is now evacuated, the water is over their Verandah and runs into the house. The power distribution and transformer for the Campground, which sit on a little mound at the roadside, are 75 % inundated. We watch with horrified trepidation and fascination as the water slowly creeps up the bank. The police warns via Radio from entering the swirling stream. Not only are there unknown holes in the ground there are also venomous snakes, rats, debris and dead cattle in the stream. We keep listening to alarming news of the rise of the waters via the radio and hear, that we are all evacuated from the caravan park. Oh? Not that we knew anything about that. We are still here. Six people really would like to go to the Civic Centre. They have run out o food and are in a tent, but nobody comes with the promised boat to their rescue. Later we hear, that the SES rescue boat has capsized with a TV crew on board and is out of service. The TV guys were able to hold on to the hull of the boat and were rescued by a police helicopter. A helicopter lands next door and gets two exhausted people on board. They have lost their house and came by boat as far as they dared before the eddies became too strong. Finally an SES helicopter lands in the campground and gets a lady and her two poodles out. I ask the policeman if they also take the stranded English gentleman without food? But they are only taking emergencies he says, they have no time to get people who are high and dry. We decide that we will all feed him and invite him for meals. The camp managers kindly let him stay in one of the cabins. It later transpires that the poodle lady only faked the emergency in order to get the flight out to Perth. She left her caravan behind but will find that, when she comes back, she will not be welcome anymore. We walk up the hill to the huge communication satellite dish which helped to put the man in the moon. Its last task was to help locate Halley's comet in 1987 then it was shut down. We climb up to the platform and have a stunning view. Brown water interspersed with ruined Banana and Mango plantations

all the way to the horizon. Towards evening the waters stagnate at a very high level. We move back to our original sites and go to bed in the hope of a deep undisturbed sleep.

Day 4, December 21, 2010

Our slumber is suddenly disturbed by the loud whirring of a landing helicopter right next to us. A TV crew from Channel 7 is descending on us. When I ask them if they have brought food, they claim, that the shops in Carnarvon were not open yet. During the night two flights have brought sorely needed provisions into town, nothing has reached us here yet. Later 10 loaves of bread and 10 containers with perishable fresh milk are brought by a large Roadrepairing machine. Does not go very far, but it is a start. The water is receding and some relief is noticeable throughout the camp. Some of us tackle the task of cleaning up Lois's and Stephen's, the managers, home. About 10 cm of water have wrecked havoc. I am commissioned to clean out the kitchen cupboard. Luckily Lois has a lot of her stuff in watertight containers, but still some things have to be binned. The floor is as slippery as an ice rink with the very fine red silt. TV, Radio etc. and a lot of the furniture is a write off. So is the kitchen combination and some of the plywood walls, they are starting to swell up due to the humidity. Fortunately the large fridge and stove were just out of the reach of the waters. At lunchtime Jane and Anna have prepared a lovely lunch for the cleanup crew, consisting of all and everything which had to be used. The large freezers some of the permanent campers have, had to be cleared out, because they thawed out without power. SES does not consider us first priority. The Camp got denied a large generator and food supplies. We are happy that we can see the water receding quite fast. Towards evening the stream over the road is only about 1 m deep. The first looters have been spotted, their target the gas stations and a banana plantation opposite the campground. They were shooed off by vigilant campers. We invite the foodless Englishman and Aernscht and Susann, two Swiss which are camping here also, for dinner. Chris, the Englishman manages to bring two bottles of wine to dinner, which he got from some locals. Very nice.

Day 5, December 22, 2010

The water has sunk to less than a meter on the road. Again we got awakened at 6 am by reconnaissance helicopters who want to see sleeping Caravanners from very close. Steve and some campers have sneaked into town and get some gas for the generators. Steve has managed to cadge a genny and we are allowed to draw some power from it. Our leisure battery was very low and we were in peril to loose the light and radio in the caravan. We still cannot run the aircondo, the fridge or the microwave, but at least the TV is running again and we can load our pc's and telephone.

Since I have an Australian phone, I have been asked the loan of it. Linda, an aboriginal women who is stranded here on the way to a meeting of their land corporation and a family funeral forgot to recharge her phone and needed to call the different parties, that she could not attend, a German traveller wanted to inform a family member at the other side of Australia were they were. My new job here: phone provider.

Some campers venture out and try to go shopping in town. They come back with some fuel and some fresh goods, but also with the news, that the police is still blocking the road and almost did not let them back to the campground. Our Troopy is due for a service in town tomorrow, so we will try to go in tomorrow morning early and already have shopping lists for all the German speaking campers from Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

We start enjoying ourselves, the camp is fast becoming a closely knit community. The danger becomes an adventure now. The managers, despite losing their home, do their utmost best in order to make our stay a pleasant one. Tonight Sabine und Hansi, two Austrians, will be our dinner guests.

Day 6, December 23 2010

Hurrah, the water has sufficiently receded, that we manage to drive over a little sandy track to a major road and prudently proceed to Carnarvon. It is high time that we do some shopping for the festive holidays, After all: tomorrow is Christmas Eve! It feels great to be out again, almost as if we had been incarcerated for a week, even though under very nice circumstances. We enter Woolly's the "Fresh Food People" but there is no fresh food, not even much frozen items. Empty shelves as far as we can see. When I ask the sales staff if and when they will receive fresh produce, they only shrug and don't know. It is no use to ask the dispatcher in Perth, because they just put goods at the airport and every plane takes as much as it can carry next to the passenger. It is always a surprise of what they get, when the staff go out to the Airport in Carnarvon to get these goods. Since there is no refrigeration on the passenger planes, there is no fresh food. It reminds me of the bad old days in Russia and the Eastblock, when people queued every morning in order to buy whatever was on offer for the day, not whatever they needed.

Our Troopy got serviced despite the manager of the Toyota Garage in Carnarvon. This guy had such a bad day, that he exhausted nearly all my patience. At 7.30 in the morning he was in such a foul mood, that he tore up the order form before I was able to patiently persuade him to rewrite the form and get the work done. One could almost be led to believe, that customers are a noxious pest. Of course, at the end he ripped us off royally. Not an experience I would suggest anyone in or around Carnarvon to have. I guess he needs to restring his nerves. For an hour in the afternoon the gate to the waterworks next to the caravan park is opened, so that the large mobile homes and caravans can drive out to a safe road. The next morning the road leading to the north should be open for vehicles wanting to leave Carnarvon. Still nobody can come back in and the road south is blocked for an undefined time. I am getting very tired and exhausted. The excitement and action plus the early morning choppers start taking their toll.

Day 7, December 24, 2010

Most of our new friends have left Carnarvon because they have a plane to catch out of Perth sometime beginning of January. The Southbound highway will be closed for some undefined time and they have to go the long way round back up north and then down south on the inland highway. 2'200 km instead of approx. 900 km. It will be very hot in the interior, so they all left very early in the morning. For a few moments, It feels a bit lonely, but then we meet up with Beth and Val who we met on a campground before we got evacuated from there. They each drive a motorhome plus they own a little car to get around in. They have asked me to drive the car up to Capricorn caravan Park when we evacuated, they would follow shortly. However, they never showed up. There I was with a car, no telephone number for its owner and no idea where they were. After some research I managed to get their telephone numbers and sent them a text: "This is your car speaking, I am high and dry!" It turned out, that Val and Beth were not anymore allowed to drive up the road and had been sent to the Civic Centre, where they stayed during the floods. We will have Boxing day lunch together at our place.

A few trucks made it the long way round from Perth, we have some fresh veggies in the stores. They drove 22 instead of 8 hours in order to deliver some fresh food to us. The fishing corporation decided to give two large containers of freshly caught and cooked crabs away, because

they cannot deliver them to the buyers. Yummie!

Until we regain power It will be a hot Christmas. Another tropical storm is threatening the North West Coast. No one knows, how far down that one will come. We will see.

Day 8. December 25 2010, Christmas day

While we are all sitting together under a shady tree, technicians worked overtime and gave us all a lovely Christmas present. They restored our power!!! Yeahhhh

PS: No sooner have the floods receded in the West, tropical storms of epic dimensions have swamped the East. 20 large towns are threatened. Large parts of the population had to be evacuated. The military came to help. Both flooded zones together are the largest food producers of Australia. Fruit,

Shark Bay

After our prolonged stay in Carnarvon due to the floods, the roads south were finally cleared, so that we were able to move on. Our first stop was Denham in Shark Bay, near Monkey Mia, best known for its Dolphin feeding program. Shark Bay is a very sheltered Bay in the shape of a large W. It is shallow and reaches deep into the mainland. There are normally only 2 tides per day and water is not exchanged very often. The salinity is one and a half time as strong as out at sea. One of the elbows of the W is cut off towards the open sea by a large sand- and sea grass bank and builds Hamelin Pool. Beyond that, the salinity is even higher and reaches hyper salinity to twice as much as the sea.

These unique living conditions favour very special and unique live forms. Dugongs, huge, gentle and endangered sirens of the sea, love nothing better than to eat the abundant sea grass. The majority of all Dugongs in Australia live here.

The most extraordinary and also oldest creature on earth lives in the hyper saline area of Hamelin Pool. They are called stromatolites. You have never seen them? Well, so have most of human kind and still, we all owe this creature our life. Stromatolites have existed since over 3.5 Billion years. Well before there was no other life on earth and only about 1 % oxygen in the atmosphere. Stromatolites are tiny cyanobacteria that attract calcium carbonate and cluster together to build roundish rock structures. They have a very special way of feeding. They use photosynthesis from the sun in order to exchange Carbon into oxygen. In those far away times there was water everywhere and stromatolites thrived. They had no competitors or predators. They enriched the atmosphere up to 21 % of oxygen and in the water many oxygen breathing life forms including fish and ultimately, humans evolved. The living stromatolites in Hamlin pool are about 3000 years old and thrive, because the hyper saline water prevents the evolution of any predators. They were discovered in 1956. Some other living colonies still exists in other locations. One of the very early by-products of the oxygen production was that Iron particles oxidised and built layers on the ocean floors. When the seas receded and the land emerged tectonic forces built up mountains and ranges. One of these former sea beds now builds the Pilbara and Kimberley's where iron ore deposits are mined big time. There the oldest, now dead, stromatolites were found and estimated to be 3.5 billion years old. Shark Bay has been declared a world heritage site, not only for its stromatolites but also for the habitat for dugongs and other endangered species.

The very salty water allows millions of small white mussels to live unchallenged in the bay. Meters of white shells build a pristine white beach.

Over millions of years these shells compressed to rock which is now mined for very picturesque buildings.

The biggest magnets however are still the dolphins in Monkey Mia. A little chic resort with a camp ground, tourist office, restaurant and shops has been built there which lives exclusively from tourism. We stayed in cheaper Denham and made day trips to Monkey Mia and sure enough, the dolphins were there.

We joined an aboriginal culture tour with Daryl a very knowledgeable black fellow who addressed us as brothers and sisters. The group was made up of kids from a youth camp for children with cancer and their friends and siblings. I felt immediately at home. They were a lovely mob. We tasted bush bananas directly from the vines and also cooked in the embers of a little fire, where we baked some fish. Yummy.

After our third visit to Monkey Mia one of the rangers asked us if we would not like to volunteer for their Dolphin program. We planned to leave the day after and were on the way to sail with the Shotover, a large, former racing catamaran to explore the sea life of shark bay. It was a beautiful cruise we discovered huge sea turtles in the shallow warm waters, saw a sea snake and lots of dolphins playing around the boat. And finally, there they were: the dugongs, sirens of the seas. Large, gentle mammals with mermaid tails grazing on the vast sea grass banks. They are very shy and were lucky to see one with a calf at her side, both lifting their heads out of the water to breathe and then disappearing again. A magical Moment.

The free sunset cruise in the evening was less serene. There was quite a breeze coming up and the water was choppy. The skipper warned us upon entering the Shotover, that we would get wet. And wet we got, despite the yellow slickers which we donned. The Asian students onboard screeched and laughed with each wave washing over us it was a real fun roller coaster ride. Good thing, that the water was about 30 C and the evening air even warmer. We were soaked to the bone but had good fun. Back in the car for our last drive back to Denham I really did not want to leave, so I signed up to volunteer for 4 days.

I briefly doubted my decision when the alarm clock went off at 6 am! Beat was nice enough to prepare breakfast. But then he was glad to have some quiet days alone in the caravan to do as he pleased. When the cat is out of the house..... 7.30 my duty started with opening up the cinema and the exposition rooms, printing out and displaying the weather forecasts, preparing the fish for the dolphin feeding. Only freshly unfrozen, complete, unblemished fish is used. This was a very exact science. Each dolphin gets a maximum amount of fish fed during maximal 3 feedings until 12 am. It all has to be reported minutely including weather conditions, number of visitors, number of boats in the bay, trailer in the parking area and tide movement. In the olden days, dolphins were fed all day long, as long as they wanted. During that time, most of the young dolphins died. When it was researched, it was found out, that the mothers could not feed the young in the shallow waters and they just starved. So now there is a rigorous routine. Always the same 5 female dolphins are fed with about one third of their daily feeding. The rest they have to hunt themselves out in the Bay. They are part of closely monitored scientific research project. Male dolphins are too aggressive, so they are not encouraged to come but they still do. Up to 20 dolphins swim in the feeding area for the first feed. The ranger starts their talk and hundreds of tourists stand in the warm waters. Exactly 20 minutes after the start of the talk we volunteers have to warn them via radio that only 5 minutes are left. Then we advise them that we come down to the beach with the 5 silver buckets with the fish. Another bucket is dispatched to the edge of the beach in order to feed Pelicans to distract them from the Dolphin feeding. Otherwise they would fly in and steal the fish out of the hand of the Tourists. Everybody has to get out of the water and we enter it like the half gods we are for a couple of minutes.

Now comes the best part, we are to choose the lucky tourists who are allowed to feed one fish each to our assigned dolphin. I get Nicky, a very cheeky and feeding wise mother with her calf Fin. She turns on her side and looks at me, then she butts me lightly in the leg and waits for the goodies to come. The visitors are told by the rangers, that we would not choose anyone still standing in the water and/or pointing at themselves or making other signs to attract our attention. Still, they never learn. So I chose a middle aged lady, hand her a fish holding it at its head so she can grab the tail and tell her to hold it low and to let go once it is in Nicky's mouth. Down it goes. Nobody is allowed to touch the dolphins. Before we assign our last fish we have to hold our hand in the air. Then all the volunteers get to choose their last tourist but me. Once they have all fed their fish I get my last one, we rinse the buckets and the dolphin swim out into the Bay. Even though we feed another number of fish every day, depending on their individual weight, the dolphins know exactly when the feed is over.

After the feeding the middle aged tourist hugs me and thanks me for the experience. She is a journalist and dreamt of being able to feed a dolphin herself. Instant happiness! She does not know that sometimes we already know who to choose before the feed, like some of the cancer camp kids, or the friend of a ranger or volunteer, or a former volunteer disguised as a tourist. We are 4 to 5 volunteers, all young international students except me. One day a European girl forgets to hold up her hand when she has Nicky and feeds her last fish. Nicky turns around immediately and swims like a torpedo to another volunteer and snatches the fish from under the snout of the less experienced younger dolphin, giving the volunteer a heavy jolt and resulting bruise. Nicky weighs about 120 kg and with a speed of 40 km/h she can inflict serious injuries to all in her way. Each dolphin has its own personality. Puck likes to look up at me and rubs against my leg in order to say that she is ready for the fish. Kia would like to enter the feeding program and swims between our legs looking hopeful. Their skin feels like a soft warm rubber tube and their smile is full of potential lethal stumpy teeth. They could bite quite painfully, if they had a mind to.

After the feed we wait for the dolphins to return to the interaction area. They have to be out at least 10 minutes in order to be able to suckle their calves. Tourists come to our window and ask for the next feeding time. I invariably tell them it is on dolphin time. Some days they come in quite rapidly for all three feedings, some days they do not show up at all again before lunch time. If they come we follow the same routine again if not, we start cleaning the feeding utensils meticulously and with antiseptic, then wipe the decks and the display area, wash windows or go for a lovely stroll around the parking lots to pick up garbage. Because I speak passable English I get to announce the various documentaries we play in the little air conditioned cinema. Air conditioning is a major magnet since we are in a heat wave. One tourist asks for the snorkelling area. A Japanese volunteer replies, that there is no smoking area. Misunderstandings due to language barriers are rather common in the international volunteer crew. The German volunteer who forgot to hold her hand up did not take well to criticism by Polish/Aussi volunteer and leaves. I soon become the senior volunteer on duty and get asked if I could not stay on. I finally serve for 8 days getting to supervise all the volunteer activities enabling me to pick the raisins out of the work dough but also the difficult customers. One morning during the ranger talk of the first feed a rather irate Norwegian tourist comes to the window and asks when finally, the feed would begin! I explain that it has begun with the talk. He then gets really nasty and says he came for the feed not a lot of waffle from some ranger and could we not speed the procedure up! That it was now 8 am and the dolphins were in the bay since 7 am, could we not start earlier. It was not his day. It went beyond his comprehension that we gave the approximate starting time of 7.30 so people could be there on time and we would not start earlier so that people would not miss out altogether. I guess my: "you enjoy it sir and have a good day" was kaffuffle in the wind. It takes all kind.

The whole volunteer experience was a real pleasure and also an honour. I understand that normally volunteers have to apply for at least 3

months in advance to get a place and they are very coveted. I had some extraordinary insights into the life of dolphins, rangers, tourists and international students.

Shipwreck Coast

We travelled South and pass the famous pink lake. It is a large salt lake which evaporates very quickly. In its very salty water special bacteria lives which gives the lake its intensive pink colour. The bacteria are harvested to manufacture cosmetic or to be used to colour foodstuffs. We were just in time to evade another Cyclone coming down the coast. These heavy storms raged the coast for time immemorial. The coast in itself is ragged with lovely sand beaches in between, high promontories and rocks protruding at low tide; a script for marine disaster. The coast is aptly named. Many Dutch and English merchant sailing vessels were stranded here as early as the 17th century. The Zuytdorp, which had carried untold riches and was recently found and explored, was revealing a carpet of silver. Silver coins spilling out of old treasure chests covering the bed of the sea.

The most notorious however, was the Battavia. It ran aground near Geraldton on the Abrolhos Islands in 1629 on its maiden voyage to Battavia in Java. The Museum shows a re-enactment of the gruesome happenings. They had two longboats in which the 430 passengers and crew were rowed to the islands. The senior representative of the shipping company together with some crew took one of the boats to try to sail to Battavia and get help. The rest organised themselves for a long stay. Amongst the remaining people were a number of soldiers and some rather unsavoury gentlemen one of them an envoy of the merchant company named Cornelius. He sent the soldiers without their weapons to find water and food on other islands and started a reign of oppression and terror on the first Island. The survivors had a council which defined their daily life, the amount of food and water everyone got, etc. The tainted officer usurped power, dismantled the council gave himself fancy titles, wore flamboyant clothes and tolerated no resistance. He slaughtered 143 civilian and instilled fear. The soldiers heard about that and remained on their Island with ample food and natural water. They built a fort and took in all the fugitives which made it there. The usurper tried with force and deception to beat the soldiers. Luckily at that very moment, the rescue ship from Battavia arrived and the terrorists got gruesomely executed then and there.

About 10 years ago a group of enthusiasts started to rebuild the longboat of the Battavia. One of the leading craftsmen was a Swiss still living in Geraldton. They took some plans from Viking longboats and got a lovely boat together. We were fortunate enough to be able to go sailing with that longboat on a Sunday afternoon together with some of the enthusiasts. Beat and I got to man the jib sail during the whole voyage. We even saw some sea lions sunning on some rocks in the bay.

Further down the coast, near Jurien Bay we are going to look at the Pinnacles. We started early in the morning and were the first and only visitors in this moonlike landscape just a stone's throw away from the coast. Golden sand with thousands of standing up yellow stone structures between low hills in the morning sunshine dazzles our eyes. There are lots of animal tracks, Kangaroos, lizards, Goannas and birds, some leading to low shrubs where they hide during the day. This unique scenery has us spellbound. There are various theories about the creation of the pinnacles. The most credible is that million years ago it used to be a forest which was inundated by the sea and covered with any meters of sand. Then the sand around it slowly eroded and set the petrified stumps of the trees free.

Further inland we visited the only Monastic town in Australia, New Norcia near Perth. It was built in the 19th century by Spanish monks. While

strolling along their main road you really get the impression of being in rural Spain. They produce their own food, veggies and wine. They sell some of their produce. Their bread and olive oil is exceptionally good. Today about 8 Monks and 120 employees are running the large agricultural estate, which results in a good profit. The very well kept churches, houses and grounds speak for themselves. Presently brown and dry because this part of W.A. is one of the only part of Australia which has not benefitted from the massive rainfalls elsewhere.

Perth

We are presently in Perth, our next Service Station: Doctors check-up (all ok), Caravan service (well done), and tyres for the Troopy. The Tyre saga will now come to its conclusion. We have a voucher from the tyre place in Melbourne for the two tyres we blew at the beginning of our travels, which they are happy to extend to one of their sister companies here in Perth. We can get the two original tyres replaced which are worn by now. All's well, that ends well.

Perth supplies us also with much needed culture. We finally get to see the movie "The Kings Speech", then we visit a sculpted Art exhibition on Cottesloe Beach. The Western Australia Aquarium lets us experience the whole coast from Broom down to Esperance again with its many live exhibits from the different coasts. Most impressive are the huge sharks and stingrays which swim all around us in the long glastunnel. Finally we enjoy a classic concert with music by Sibelius and Rachmaninov, (just great) with our friends Shirley and Trevor, whom we first met at our first Christmas in Australia in now flooded Crestwick. Slowly the circle starts to close.

Eastwards towards the middle

Kalgoorlie did not let us go as quickly as we wished. We wanted to get our flue jab here and had a doctor's appointment arranged, when we got a call one hour before to tell us that we had to re-arrange, the doctor was sick. One of those Monday sicknesses was my guess. But when on the next day the surgery called again to cancel and said now the second GP was sick, I got a bit worried and we went to another Medical centre. So, here we are a little bit longer. This gave us time to really estimate the beautiful Victorian buildings in the city. There was a true competition going between the men with money. We discovered that former US President Edgar J. Hoover spent some years in Kalgoorlie as a young mining engineer. He loved the life here so much, that he donated a huge mirror to the Palace Hotel. Could it be because of the earlier form of the "Skimpies"? The most beautiful Victorian building in my eyes is the York Hotel. Perfectly preserved in and out it has a wonderfully curved stairways and even sports a balcony on which one could sip an evening drink above the hustle and bustle of the main Hannan Street.

We went up to Mt. Charlotte which houses the huge tank at the end of the water pipeline from Perth. One gets an impression of the massive task which was undertaken in 1902 and 1903. The initiator of the pipeline had really visionary ideas. He had to overcome about 230 m of difference in heights over 650 km of pipeline. He came up with 8 large holding tanks each with its own pumping station. Then he took a very novel technology to get the pipeline together. They used half pipes which traditionally had been put together with rivets, prone to rusting and producing leaks. So he employed the new technology of inserting long metallic staves all along the lengths of the iron half tubes which would keep water in much better. He first opted to have most of the pipeline underground, which lead to some corrosion. In the depression years the pipeline was taken above ground. In 1970 the pipeline was overhauled some parts are still the originals, the old steam pumps had only then been replaced by electric pumps.

Today we can hardly imagine what it meant to the population to have enough drinking water. No more Typhoid fever through dirty water. Water then was almost as precious as gold. Before that, ladies wanting a second cup of tea were told, that there was not enough water and were offered some Champagne. For the opening party of the water pipeline in 1903 there were huge amounts of Champagne. A contemporary dignitary wrote that he had never been to a party dedicated to water where so little of it was drunk.

The Nullarbor

This huge, vast stretch of absolutely flat land is very aptly named. After an initial stretch there are really no more trees.

We chose Frasier Range Station for our first overnight stop and stayed another day. It was really beautiful. Quiet, peaceful and a camp fire in the evening restored our energies after the eventful stay in Kalgoorlie. Slowly after a first drink the guys started to tell tales. One went back to the swinging sixties, when he drove with his parents over the same 1000 km stretch of nothingness. Then the road in the Western Australian part was not sealed then and had huge potholes in them which were filled with the very fine bulldust. The dust was the same colour as the road so you would not see the holes, very devious. His father was told many times not brake at all costs should he fall into one of those holes, but drive straight through. Well, as men have it, they seldom listen. He drove into a hole and hit unto the brakes. There goes. The two rear tires went and not roadhouse, station or anything for hundreds of km. The son flagged down a road train and went to the next roadhouse, only to be told, that: "No we do not have any spare tires or tubes, sorry mate." The son had to go for about 500 km to get the tires repaired and came back to the car 11 hours later. They then drove to that first roadhouse to get something to eat and a bed for the night. When they told the Landlady their story, she went all red in the face and said that the barn was full of tires and called her lazy mechanic husband. Apparently his evening was not too peaceful

At approximately the same time the owners of Fraser Range Station needed a new UTE. An enterprising car dealer in Perth advertised that he would trade in anything for the sale of a car. The guys drove there and loved a 1947 Chevy Ute. They then acquainted the car dealer with their trade in which they unloaded from their trailer. It was a camel. The car dealer had to honour his add, but changed it immediately after that. The old Chevy can still be seen at the entrance to Fraser Station.

We left the hospitable Station and drove Australia's longest straight road, 145 km straight as a rod. The landscape got a bit monotonous, even though the small shrubs and bushes showed an amazing variety of greens; blue-, yellow-, dark-, light-, dusty-, fresh-, gray-, drab-, olive-, shiny-, linden-, pine-, bamboo-, intensive-green and every shade in between. Since there is no Radio reception, we passed the time by listening to a very funny audio book by Torsten Krol called Callisto. The author lives in Queensland but that is all anybody knows about him. Not even his publisher knows who he really is. I suppose he is an American by the way he writes. The book is sort of an adult version of Catcher in the Rye or Shit happens. You'll love it.

Other people pass the time by playing the 18 hole, 72 par Nullarbor Golf course. It starts at Kalgoorlie and ends in Ceduna, with 1365 km it is the longest golf course on earth. Every roadhouse, Station or little town on the way has one hole. You buy your score card at the one of the points and then stamp it as you go along. At the end you get a certificate. The greens are laid with artificial grass carpet, since there is rarely any rain to get regular greens. There is even an eight day championship once a year.

The heart of the Nullarbor plain is the world's biggest, flattest piece of limestone, covering an area of approx. 200'000 square km and up to 300 m thick. It was once part of the ocean floor and can best be seen from one of the lookouts along the 90 m high Baxter cliffs.

The Nullarbor Roadhouse offers Motel, Backpacker and Camping Accommodation. Towards late afternoon the dusty flat campground starts filling with Motorhomes, Caravans and Tent trailers. But the Roadhouse is also destination for a traveller of a different kind. Shortly before Sunset a little one motor Airplane sets down and taxis to the Roadhouse / Airport. The owner and Pilot has assembled the plane himself and is on the way from Esperance to Broken Hill. The failing daylight made him stop at Nullarbor before he flies on tomorrow to Lake Eyre which is full of water and life for only the second time in almost a century and then on to Broken Hill. His little two seater can fly up to 300 km/h and is not hampered by rutted roads. The pilot still follows the roads, it is the only way of orienting himself, other than the dried out riverbeds and Salt lakes.

We are approaching Ceduna where we have to pass a fruit fly stop. We will not be able to carry any fresh fruit or veggie from W.A. into Southern Australia and are eating very healthily at present. We will cook up any remaining fruit which we are allowed to take with us. The fruit vendors of Ceduna have a ball. Unfortunately their fruit selection is by far poorer than the one in Kalgoorlie.

Gawler Ranges

Remember the time when we suffered from the heat over 35 C and humidity? It is not so very long ago. Now we are using the heater in the caravan and are wearing fleece jackets and long trousers instead of shorts. Winter is approaching and we have temperatures between 6 and 18 C with a cold wind directly from Antarctica. No more drinks full of Ice cubes in frosted glasses, now a hot chocolate is on the order of the day. We are ready to go up north towards the warmer tropics again, but, alas, the weather charts show, that the cold goes right up to Katherine and that it is even frostier in the normally red hot middle. So, we take it easy and stop in the Gawler Ranges, a series of 1.5 Billion years old volcanic mountains where the Rhyolite Organ Pipes can be seen. These stony formations are visible through erosion which lays the usually compact structure of this rock masses bare. There are other rock masses which look like huge dinosaur eggs, some of the cracked open and hollow. They are so big, that we can sit in one and could have a warming fire between us. There are plenty of Emus and large gray kangaroos which have donned their winter fur and look very cuddly. We know better.

We have visited an animal sanctuary in Ceduna where orphaned kangaroos and Wombats are reared by a dedicated couple and their voluntary friends. I get to hold one of the small Joey's. It is all bones, ears and furs and nuzzles my shirt. Then the little kangaroo gets back into the warm pouch made up of an old fleece jacket, gets a little bib with protein rich formula and promptly falls asleep. The tiny hairy nosed Wombats are treated the same, but as soon as they get older, they romp around and could run you right off your feet, if you have your legs not apart, so that they can run through. Wombats get to be 40 kg have a bony plate at the back under their fur and use it as a weapon. They can kill a fox just by pressing him to the wall of one of their burrows and could seriously harm humans, if they were so inclined. In nature they are rather shy and evade human contact. They burrow a labyrinth underground and have large and long tunnels in between their niches in which they normally live alone. At the stage we get to hold them, they are cuddly and have a soft fur. Wombats are the closest relations to Koala and still have a withered little thumb on their hind feet from their tree dwelling days.

Our next stay was on Mt. Ive Station on the North side of the Gawler Ranges near Lake Gairdner. On this large normally dry salt lake each year

racers with Speed cars are held. Some of the world's fastest Speed records have been achieved on this blinding white expanse. I stepped on it very gingerly every moment expecting to slip as on cold wintry ice. But far from it. The salt is a thin coarse crust on the dry lakebed and but I still cannot get rid of the eerie feeling, that it might crack any moment and I would stand on a floating Iceberg. So I quickly walk back to the safe shore. Mt. Ive Station is a wonderful place for exploration. We drive out to an area where wombats live. They dig huge inter connecting burrows. Sometimes the roofs on the tunnels cave in and reveal the extensive building activities of these night active marsupials. The entry holes range from 20 cm to over 1 m in height and width. We are glad that they are asleep during the day; they would run us over with no effort at all.

We are puzzled by a sign saying that the donkey needs feeding constantly. We saw a lot of firewood but no hay for the donkey. It turns out that the donkey is a large old tin container full of water. Underneath it there is a low fire burning which needs to be fed by long dry logs. This heats the water we use for our hot showers. An ingenious contraption which was used all over Australia's Outback in the olden days.

We finally have got ourselves a pet!

You know how much we miss our dogs. It goes so far, that we lure stranger's dogs and cats to our caravan just so that we can pet them. Beat even bought some dog nibbles to that effect. But it is not the same as having a pet ourselves. The visiting cats and dogs enjoy the additional attention, but as soon as their owners whistle, they are straight back with wagging tails. Plus they are not Beagles and only Beagles have those soft, warm ears! There are animals which would like to live with us. There are the mosquitoes, but they are so greedy. We are not stingy with pet food but our own blood? I ask you... Flies also have tried to ingratiate themselves. They are not so greedy and ravenous but each time I stretch out for a well deserved little Siesta there sure is at least one fly who sits on my nose, ear or other tickly part of me. In short, not an ideal match. They get rather irksome, especially if they bring their whole family with them. Ants have tried to sneak into our lives, well they really brought their whole tribe and took possession of my bathrobe. I only noticed it on my way to the showers, when burning sensations prickled my back and arms. I could not tear off the bathrobe there and then, for obvious reasons, what with all the other campers there. Imagine the headline of the next days paper: "Wild Swiss woman doing a native dance in the nude!" I have certainly broken an Olympic record in short term sprinting with crocs on the feet; so much for ants as friendly pets. Well, we never actively searched for a pet, after all we are only for a limited time in Australia and what would we do with it when we leave? Until, a couple of days ago in Minnipa, the incredible just happened. Joy over Joy! It has simply adopted us. No discussion about it! It is not very big and does not eat a lot. So far it is very unpretentious almost self-effacing. It is very shy. To tell you the truth, we have not even seen it yet ourselves, but it is here. We are in no doubt. We have heard it every night. Very discreetly it nibbles and rustles our little mouse. In the first night it found a forgotten muesli bar in our all and sundries drawer. To be on the safe side we have locked all other tempting foodstuffs into plastic boxes. Mousy has interpreted this differently, it was everybody for itself. Last night a thoroughly depressed Mousy has nibbled on one of my Effexor capsules. Now we house a surely ravenous and lonely but certainly wildly happy Mousile in the caravan and wait until it gets up enough courage to reveal itself.

We are off Mousy! It does not know how to behave. Imagine, it actually started nibbling on the dog biscuits! What a conceited little shyster. That is simply not on. A mouse eating like a dog, imagine.... Next thing we know, it becomes carnivorous and you know, what that would mean for us! No, it has overstayed its welcome. We have had it! And it too... One of us has got to go and it's not going to be me!

We get ourselves equipped. The directions say that we should put some Peanut butter as bait, which we do not have. Beat implores me to buy a jar, which I refuse. I have the slight suspicion, that he uses our furry guest to further his own intentions. Not so! We use cheese and breakfast cereals. Maybe, that is why we are not successful in the first night. Beat sees his Peanut butter ascending on the horizon.

Mousile is still with us. It apparently does not like cheese and cereals, even though it should be very healthy for you. Beat suggests Peanut butter. How blatantly obvious! We are way out in the sticks 120 km to the next shop. Even if I wanted to buy some, there is none to be had. I also wonder why Mousile has not left us, seeing that there are no acceptable foodstuffs in our cupboards for it. Maybe, just maybe, it ventures outside during the day to eat out and then comes back at night for the warmth and cosiness of the Caravan? Then Beat jumps at me with a broad smile on his face and a little jar in his hand. "Guess what this is?" I guess that it is mustard. Beat has conjured out of the depth of his cooking utensils a jar of ..yes, Peanut butter! Now he remembers why it was buried deep under more desirable condiments. He tried it and did not like it. Ok, so now we prepare a feast for Mousile and hope it likes it.

Well Mousie was not in any hurry. It showed a penchant for my dry Instant Porridge. We felt it prudent to clean out all foodstuffs out of the caravan and keep them in the car for a day or two. Now everything has its sunny side, after all they say if you are given a lemon, make lemonade! We found some sorely missed package of base for Yorkshire Puddings in the depth of our storage room under my bed.

Of course, even in a crisis we would never forget our good manners as hosts. Also unasked and unwelcome guests overstaying their welcome can always count on a little feed. Knowing, that Mousie would certainly starve without our help, we offered two different menus. One was Peanut butter and cheese, and the other those lovely Nice Biscuits, you know the ones with the sugar on top, to which Mousie seemed to be partial during the last few days.

Well, Mousie chose the biscuits. Good choice. It will keep Mousie in good fettle on its way to the land where milk and cheese (Fondue?) flow. The next day we read in the paper about the Mouse Panic here. I am sure we could give them a little tip or two. Tell you what. I almost miss our little co-habitant. The nights are so quiet now. It led Beat to re-assess the pet question and he decided he would now host a little farm with live ants....!

A screw loose or two

It seems that I now have two screws loose, at least one more than what some people have suspected all along. I owe this rather surprising fact to some dental failure which could only be fixed in South Australia's capital Adelaide. From the Campground north of Adelaide we were able to take the O-Bahn into the City Centre. The O-Bahn is a unique very fast transport. In town it runs like any normal bus, but outside, it has a dedicated track, much like a railway. The buses let out little wheels which guide it along the tracks and they shoot along at high speeds. It took us just 3 minutes what a normal bus would need 20 minutes for. Great! Then they have free tramway which we took to the market. And there, joy over joy, we found a Swiss Bakery which offered real rye bread with a crusty outside and a soft inside. It kept fresh for a full week. Hurrah. Good bread is one of the very few things we miss in Australia.

This stay gave us also the chance to re-visit a last years destination Again. Remember February 2010 when we were so stunned about the

almost dry Lake Alexandrina at the Murray Mouth? We even found a sailboat in the middle of a meadow not looking as if it would go anywhere anytime soon. After all the floods in Queensland and Victoria the water has reached Lake Alexandrina. The little protected former fisherman's shacks which are now used as weekend houses received a new lick of paint or an improved veranda in expectation of a good season. Imagine, we even found the marooned sailboat again. It is still at the very same spot but is now floating in the water and ready to be sailed at any moment.

The Flinders Ranges

This is one of the few highlights which we had travelled to on our first tour in Australia in 1996 on a Harley and which made such an impression, that we were eager to visit it again. Last year it was just too hot when we were ready to go there, but this year it is winter and beautifully balmy. Sunshine and crystal clear skies every day for a whole week. We followed some Aboriginal tracks up to some ancient rock paintings and carvings. One brochure talked about an easy one hour walk. When we came back from steep tracks uphill with stunning views and rocky inclines, we found, that the sign on the start point, which we walked by quickly, showed that we just finished a two hours moderately difficult hike. We were very proud of ourselves and also a bit sore in strategic places. Next day we were cleverer, we took the shuttle bus part of the way into Wilpena Pound and even got a reduction in fare by being seniors. Our age has its light moments. We still managed to hike higher than ever, 200 vertical meters over a short hike up and were rather knackered by the time we got back to the bus terminal. But what wonderful sights and we were mostly alone on the tracks other than the lovely colourful birds and the occasional Kangaroos or even the king of the air, the wedgetail Eagle.

The Flinders have surpassed our expectations. We even saw a bunch of the rare bright red Sturts Pea in one of the gorges. Brachina Gorge is a travel through time. Remember the Stromatolites which started to build up our Ozone Layer 3.5 Billion years ago? The geological formations in Brachina Gorge reveal rock layers from 600 Million years ago. Then, thanks to the Ozone which screened out the deadly UV radiation, some jellyfish like animals started to emerge. They left their tracks in the sand which turned to rock, now visible in the gorge. Awesome.

The creation of Ikara (Wilpena Pound) as the Aborigines tell it:

Yurlu the Kingfisher went to attend a ceremony at Ikara. He lit fires to signal his presence forming the coal deposits in the region. At the same time two Akurra (Rainbow Serpent), creator figures, also travelled towards Ikarra. They climbed up the mountain slopes to see what was happening. People were gathered for a ceremony. When they looked up to the sky, mistook the eyes of the Akurra for stars. When the ceremony began, the two Akurra split up to surround the people. They stirred up whirlwinds and in the confusion caught and ate everyone at the ceremony except Walha the bush turkey and Yurlu the kingfisher and two young men. The two Akurra were so full, that they decided to lie down around the ceremony place and became the walls of Wilpena Pound.

Having completed the circumnavigation of Australia since we started 19 months ago, we are now ready to go north up through the middle.

The red hot center

Well, not quite so hot, after all it is winter, but very red and green and yellow and white and, and, and. It has rained in the desert and it is in bloom. What beautiful flowers the arid landscape can produce. We have seen the unique carmine red Sturts Pea but also the marginally less shining darker red Australian hops, the yellow honey grevillea, the green yellow parrot pea and plenty of minute white, pink and mauve flowers on shrubs all over only outdone by the little yellow balls of witchetty acacia and all the blue and mauve daisies and salt bush leaves.

We could not have chosen a better time to travel north again towards the centre of Australia. We did not want to miss the Birdsville track and the Oodnadata track, so we decided to leave our caravan which is not off road worthy in Roxby downs and went by car for the weekend to Marree to the Australian Camel Cup Races. Marree is about as far Outback as you can get. No Bitumen Roads, no Mobile Phone Service but the desert is looming very close. What a show. About 20 camels entered the different races, not all of the riders finished them though on the back of their beasts. In between we enjoyed a dog race specially put up for pets, greyhounds were excluded. A hilarious race with sniffing and little fights between the legs of the anxious owners took place. One of the mutts even had a coat declaring her as a winner of one of these races. Especially for the kids there were also donkey races. The smallest rider was not older than 18 months and was held aloft by both parents and a donkey handler. All in all a very satisfactory race day. We stayed in the renowned Marree hotel which was built in the Victorian era and has not changed much since then.

The Oodnadata track held more surprises. In the middle of the desert we visited two springs one of them on a little hill, the waterhole perfectly round taking most of the summit. The other one was aptly named the bubbler and bubble it did. Smaller and larger air bubbles came to the surface, the big ones shrouded in sand and clay which then settled again on the brim forming ever changing patterns.

Most of all we enjoyed a look over the full Lake Eyre. Apparently it has only been full three times since the white man came to Australia and we were lucky enough to witness this spectacle. Millions of birds come from a far to nest and rear their chicks as long as the bounty lasts, then they might disappear again for decades until the next time large floods in Queensland produce such an amount of water again.

15 years ago when we came up the Stuart Highway towards Coober Pedy we stopped at Glendambo Roadhouse. We enjoyed a lovely sunset and fled from a myriad of flies into the Pub. There we had a steak for dinner which was delicious. On our way back down south we thought that we wanted to enjoy that experience again and the steak was terrible. Hard, black and burnt. When we asked why there was such a difference, we were told that the cook was off the second day and a handyman was in the kitchen. This time we made sure, that we enquired first if the cook was on duty before ordering a meal. Glendambo was the first of the revisited places which in parts still looks exactly the same as we remembered it.

Coober Pedy has grown out of all proportions and in all directions. 55 km before the town you can already see little white molehills from the opal seekers adorning the flat land right and left of the highway. Coming closer the landscape resembles a huge rabbit warren with hills and holes everywhere. The town itself has definitely gone to seeds. Even though it now sports a supermarket, most of the other shops look definitely derelict, dusty and sad. They are attended by pensioned off miners who give a half hearted effort. The road is now bitumen but so full of red dirt, that you can hardly see the black tarmac underneath. Nothing like the hustle and bustle of the other big opal town, Lightning Ridge.

In addition to all of that, the mice caught up with us. We had three more blind passengers in a row, until I finally lay under the Caravan to check out where there could be an entry. And sure enough there was an outlet for waste water coming through the floorboard which left a small gap and there the mice were able to climb in. I took some steel wool and silicon paste and closed it off. Now we should be mouse safe. Well, the next day I heard some scratching and gnawing, but did not see any signs in the caravan. It turned out, that a mouse tried to get in and found the entry way barred. It left tooth marks next to my handy work, but could not destroy it. Let's see how long we can withstand the siege.

One of the best stops we had was on Cadney Homestead Roadhouse. No sooner did we park the caravan, that we heard a loud engine noise and saw a flying doctor plane land right next to us. Out comes a lady doctor and two nurses. They are here to see to the cook who complains of stomach aches. Shall we really eat in the Roadhouse tonight? They take up one of the motel rooms and then hold a clinic for everyone who needs their services and has phoned ahead to make an appointment. The RFDS land regularly once a month here. It is the only possibility for the people around here to get to a GP. As a night spectacle we were promised the passing of the luxurious Ghan train which rumbles by here once or twice a week on its journey from Adelaide to Darwin. We visit the Painted Desert and the Ackaringa hills from there. If you love desert and changing colours, this is one of the highlights of Australia, which not very many tourists visit. We met two cars all day.

Uluru

We are slowly approaching another highlight of Australian landscape, Uluru or Ayers Rock. This is arguably one of the most visited Icons of Australia. 400'000 visitors a year cannot go by unmanaged. And that is exactly what it is: Managed. This world heritage site is jointly managed by the Aborigine owner and Park services. The whole lot is managed by this one group. They do their best in order to give the best possible facilities to see Uluru from all aspects from sunrise till sundown. The park gives the impression of being expertly manicured. It sort of reminded me of Disneyland. The whole Area including the Kata Tjuta (Olgas) are significant sacred sites to the local Anangu Aboriginal People. They are very traditional and keep to the old ways in as much as they do not want outsiders to know all the secret stories around Uluru. They part with small snippets of stories, but do not part with their knowledge to non initiated outsiders. This goes so far, that they do not even talk about what kind of creator beings have built Kata Tjuta or promote or explain the lovely rock art which can be seen by walking around Uluru. Maybe this is the reason, why we did not get warm with Uluru. Granted, the monolith looks daunting when you see it from a far and the colour changes are stunning. It is lovely for the eyes but leaves the heart cold.

There are still people climbing the rock despite health, hygienic and safety warnings and cultural concerns by the Anangu people. 40 people have died on the rock hundreds have been hurt and more died later from the effects of the 380m high almost vertical climb. The hygienic concerns have to do with the fact, that there is no toilet on the summit and rains wash the human waste down the rock sides into the lovely waterholes which have been drinking water to the people and animals alike. Even animals do not like to drink out of them anymore. The Anangu are Mala people, that means their Ancestor Spirit is the Mala, the rufus hare wallaby. Together with the marsupial mole which has its meanings at Uluru, the black footed rock Wallaby and numerous other animals, the Mala does not live here anymore. The landscape very empty of marsupials and we have seen few bird variety. The one surprising bird we have seen there was the brown quail.

One tale about Uluru and the Mala people is known and here it is.

The Mala people and the Devil dog

When Aborigines hold their ceremonies and you are invited, you must attend. Nobody can leave or interrupt the ceremony until it is finished, this can last days or week.

Once upon a time the Mala people have started their ceremony with dances and singing and were in full swing, when two men from the northwest came and invited to their own ceremony. The Mala people regretfully had to decline, because they could not leave before the ceremony had ended. The two messengers from the north went home and their people were miffed. They decided to punish the Mala people and sent the devil-dog. In the Mala camp, everybody was in a festive mode, only the Kingfisher woman saw a huge black cloud rolling in. She tried to warn the Mala people but they did not want to listen. The cloud came nearer and nearer, the grasses bent low and the devil dog changed its appearance to an Eagle and came with undiminished force towards the Mala Camp. He changed back to his dog form and crashed into the cave wall where the ceremony was held. You can still see a huge imprint of a dogs paw at its wall. The devil dog killed the first two Mala men and chased the rest of the people out of the camp. The Mala people fled southwards and got help from another tribe in order to get rid of the devil dog.

The Alice

Time for us to go north to Alice. This is the last corner of Australia which we have not yet explored. This legendary town lies right in the middle of Australia lies on the mostly dry Todd River and is garded by the Macdonnel Ranges. The rivers in this area are called upside down rivers, because they are mostly dry on top, but deep underneath the water flows unseen by us, but well known by the Aborigines. The Todd River is home to the annual Henley on Todd Regatta. It is one of the highlights of the hottest town in Australia's red centre. It is held in winter and everybody gets their boats ready weeks in advance. The only thing which can cancel the regatta is, water in the river. Since the Todd River is dry most of the year, certainly in winter, the many boats are not powered by oars or wind. The skipper and his crew, from first officer down to the lowest deckhand have to power their craft with their feet. A big hoot. As a big finale three ferocious looking, large battle boats entered the dry, dusty river bed. Each manned and womanned by a motley crew and powered by some strong 4x4 vehicle underneath. It was all out war between the Navy, the Vikings and the Pirates. With a lot of booms, dust clouds, water guns, flour balloons and panache, the three boats gave their all. After a ten minute battle the Vikings emerged as the winners of this epic sea battle.

The Henley on Todd is another of the great quirky Outback Festivals in the Northern Territories. Darwin has its annual Ice Hockey match on Cable Beach. The whole club meets at the beach complete with sticks and Puck. The referee then decides on the playability and thickness of the Ice by letting the Puck drop upon the surface. If the Puck sinks, which it is prone to do with an air temperature of 30 C in winter, the game is called off as it has unfortunately been done so every year since inception of the club. Then the teams repair happily to the pub for their well earned beer.

Alice Springs has plenty of activities on offer. We browse through some galleries with excellent Aborigine Painting, traditional and contemporary.

We find one which has three more pictures of Teresa Ross Naparula on offer, the artist from whom we already own a picture. Her style is traditional and beautifully worked out. We cannot resist and buy another one. The prices on the labels are rather steep, but with a bit of bargaining we can get it for less than half the price, which makes it a very good buy. In the evening we go to a didgeridoo show of one of the best didg players. Good stories, good music fantastic sounds out of a termite hollowed out piece of wood. The pioneer women's hall of fame and the desert park are very special highlights and give a deep insight into the life in the red desert.

We spent a number of days in the Macdonnell Ranges exploring their many beautiful gorges and driving to the most amazing Aboriginal rock carvings in Roma and N'dhala gorge as well as the beautiful and tranquil Palm grove where Palms have survived since the time of the Dinosaurs. But these treasures needed to be earned the hard way. The way to them was not a conventional road, but a pre historic one. Beat had to use his entire off road driving skills to negotiate the rocky, pebbly, sandy and watery terrain in a mostly dry river bed. We took it really slow which was a wise thing to do. We had to negotiate around a stranded Land cruiser whose axle shanks had broken. The driver wanted to go too fast. A park Ranger tried to get the car drivable to get out of the gorge.

The Macdonnell Ranges are the most astonishing rock formations in red, changing their colour during the day. They fascinated me so thoroughly, that I, all of a sudden got the urge to start painting them in water colour. Now, most of you know, that I am the most ungifted artist there is under the sun. But still, I took Beats water colours and dabbled at a liking. I soon found out, that the Macdonnells pose a really formidable motive. I quickly settled for river red gum trees and found out, that water colour is one of the most difficult media to be employed, but I really love it. I think I will get some lessons once I am back home.

One of the strange conundrums of nature is, that now, after record rainfalls in almost all parts of Australia and abundant water in most rivers, the fire danger will be extremely high this summer. But after some thought, it will become more logic. The rains result in huge growth of wild flowers, grass, herbs, shrubs; everything is green. At the beginning. Then, the sun gets hotter and hotter and the new shoots get drier and drier. So, the tiniest spark can light the largest Bush fire. That is why, towards the end of winter, controlled cold, meaning low burning, bushfires are lit and small patches of land are burned. But a little unexpected wind can fan these little bushfires into raging hot fires getting out of control. This happened near Alice Springs and the highway has had to be closed for a couple of days and thick black and yellow smoke made breathing rather difficult.

The last almost two years we have explored Australia from all angles and drove about 55'000 km, spent night in about 130 different places, made some very good new friends, learned new skills, acquired plenty of new knowledge, saw amazing sights, went through some daunting experiences and finally fell in love with the red centre. We have had a magical two years in Australia, the longest we have lived consecutively in any country other than Switzerland. It will not be easy to leave this miraculous country. After having sold the car and Caravan etc, we will fly on October 25th to New Zealand and travel to Stewart Island to visit some friends there, before we leave the down under to come back home.