

Eating our way around Australia – July/August 2017

Back from Indo, planning for our next adventure finally came to fruition. After sorting ourselves with the van (we had been living in a flat during our Cairns house sit), leaving various winter stuff in storage (who needs snow gear on Cape York Peninsula) and stocking up on groceries, we headed up the range to Mareeba, then onwards northwards towards the “tip” It only took us five days to travel the (roughly) 1000k to Seisia, staying only at rest areas on the way. Our plan was to drive straight up, and slowly drive, taking detours on the way back.

So, that is all over now, it is now November, and I have not blogged since arriving back from Indo in July. I have had few messages asking where are we, are we OK, is everything alright? A few, but not many.

Back to the Cape.....

After spending my birthday – and our 6th Anniversary of being on the road in Cairns, we headed off to the pointy end at the top of Australia.



The map on the back of the van shows our journey of six years, as at 9th July 2017.

We did not take long to get there; we stayed on the Peninsular Development Road (PDR) for five days of corrugation and dust, arriving safely in Seisia. The van followed along behind us, no dust inside, although beginning to show signs of dirt on the outside.

After setting up camp in Seisia – an indigenous community town on the western side of the cape, we were able to day trip to the Tip, Somerset and Loyalty & Alau Beaches.



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It was quite funny to arrive at the Tip (also known as Pajinka) to find queues of travellers, all waiting for their turn to take a selfie and post it on Facebook – yes despite the area being so remote, there is Telstra reception there.

From Seisia, we headed over to Thursday Island, Horn Island and Friday Island on a three island adventure tour. The boat took us first to Friday Island, where we visited a pearl farm (actually only saw their souvenir shop and had a coffee) then on to TI for lunch and Horn for a visit to their museum. Great day out on the boat.



Nearby Somerset promised to be a great place to camp for a few days, so we collected the van, bumped past the Croc Tent (an information and souvenir place out in the middle of nowhere!) and plonked ourselves only metres from the beach – keeping on croc watch – pegging our satellite dish on the beach so we could watch the last of the series of Masterchef!

John on Croc Watch at Somerset.



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It might have taken only five days to reach the tip, but we planned now to take our time and zig zag our way back down. Few days later, found us topping up with food in Bamaga before heading back over the Jardine River



on the little barge and heading down to Fruit Bat Falls, where we swam, washed off the dust, swam, had our backs massaged under the falls. Oh, and swam!



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For those who don't know, you cannot swim in many places up here for the fear of crocodiles – and in summer, the stingers. But Fruit Bat Falls are safe. Unfortunately, we could not get our rig into Elliott Falls as the water crossings were too deep for our rig.

Obviously we could not take our van on the OTT (old telegraph track), even though the Gall Boys would do it, but we did want to watch what all the adventure was about, so we left the van at the nearby ranger station (Heathland National Park) and drove down the old track to Gunshot, where a lot of the big boys play. It was quite interesting to watch the 4wds drive into the mud, get stuck, winch out, and go back and do it again. Fun afternoon of entertainment, but not for us, our 4WD tows our home around; we can't afford to have anything broken.



Also without the van, we took a trip down a narrow track to Captain Billy Landing, a wildly rugged remote beach on the eastern side of the cape. It was quite strange to walk along a wildly windy white beach, and pick up rubbish that probably originated in Indonesia or Vietnam. Bottles with foreign writing on them, old toothbrushes and single thongs appeared to be the most frequently found objects.



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Back on the west coast (does seem rather strange to talk about the west coast of Queensland) we settled into the camping grounds at Weipa, where we were able to explore the mining town, take a Rio Tinto mine tour of the Bauxite mine, and drive out to Pennefather River. The town is a mix of miners and indigenous, who appear to take the business of mining very seriously, and advise Rio Tinto on traditional best practice on land management before, during and after the mining. Vegetation and animal regeneration is on the top of their list of priorities, and they appear to be working well with the mining companies. It was also interesting to learn more about “cool burns” which they (the indigenous in conjunction with Parks) operate every two years. By burning areas while they are still green, the vegetation does not burn to a cinder, and regenerates very quickly. Hot fires (i.e. those in Victoria) just burn through grass, forests and towns indiscriminately, killing off animals & vegetation, and destroying, in some cases, whole towns.



Bauxite

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Bauxite loading

The day we drove out to the mouth of the Pennefather River, we pulled up behind a local ranger's vehicle; they were letting out air pressure on their 4wd before heading out on to the beach. We asked them about the beach drive, we were advised to follow them over the dunes, and keep in their tracks as we headed up the beach. A beautiful easy drive, as they suggested, and it was not long before we saw them again at the camp grounds at Pennefather. "you follow us,



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you do good” they said, “knew you make it!” Lovely people.

Pennefather River at its mouth is wide, with beautiful sandy beach. The campers – all tent and small camper trailers – were fishing or drinking, or fishing and drinking. Fish were being caught; we were given a couple of good sized fish to take back to our kitchen. I think they were Bream.

There is a beautiful lagoon, around which most of the campers set up, but no one swims there, apparently at least three good sized crocs inhabit the area... We returned to Weipa along the narrow sandy bush track.



The camping grounds in Weipa have their own café on site – Barramunchies – where you can sit out in the open, watch the sun set over the gulf, while you eat local caught (???) barramundi and chips. Talk about eating your way around Australia.

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Sunset on the Gulf of Carpentaria

From Weipa, it was back to the east coast again, where we had ourselves booked into the Iron Range National Park and Chili Beach. Chili Beach is renowned for being windy, and windy it was. If ever you wanted to convince me to buy a wind generator for our caravan, here would be the place to use it. With little solar opportunity, but plenty of wind, we probably could survive without 240v forever. But, water as always keeps us moving.

Our site (No 22 – in case you caravan travellers venture up the cape) was right on the beach, and probably 50/50 in/out of shade, so we managed for three of the four days we were booked.



Our little piece of paradise at Chili Beach with Rose and Peter

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We were not allowed to run our genny, and wished we had a couple of portable panels to supplement the roof. The beach here, like Captain Billy Landing should be pristine, except for the flotsam and jetsam washed up on the beach. Annually a clean-up is organised between volunteers, National Parks and the Local Indigenous communities. We did our bit and collected quite a few bags of bottles, thongs, bits of plastic and polystyrene. Last year, apparently at least 4 tonnes was collected. We had been picking up rubbish all along our route on behalf of KeepCapeYorkClean, who had supplied us with clean up kits to hand out to fellow travellers.



Near to Chili Beach is another village called Portland Roads (no that is not the address; the correct address would be Portland Roads Road, Portland Roads.) At Portland Roads is a brilliant little café – out

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in the middle of nowhere – where you can get great coffee, slices and cheesecake.



Rose & Peter, Phillip & Heather joined us for morning tea at Out of the Blue Cafe

“Out of the blue” – just like that.

Lockhart River, the community closest to Chili has another beautiful beach, Quintal Beach, which has some pretty unusual rock formations along the waterfront. Lucky people to live close by.

The airport (Lockhart River) was originally the Iron Range WWII Air strip, the soldiers living in huts in the rainforest close by. As the forest was so dense, they did not have to camouflage their bases, they could not be seen by the Japanese from the air. This airstrip now forms part of the route that Skytrans operate from, Skytrans being part owned by Townsville Cowboy’s Jonathan Thurston. I believe he pilots himself as well.



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On our return from Chili Beach, we found a detour to the old Batavia Gold mines, where we spent a couple of hours wandering around looking down old gold mine shafts, looking at old boilers and looking up at gold stamps. This area was famous for what they call the Palmer River Gold Rush, which brought a lot of miners on to the cape, followed by farmers hoping to cash in on feeding the miners. Mostly, these days, the farms have gone back to the traditional owners, or are part of national parks (or both). Mines are just relics and reminders of the past.



Back on to the PDR for a while till we reached Coen, where we camped just out of town at “The Bend” a stretch of river with sandy beaches. Very popular with both travellers and local, we quickly located a sandy spot on a little



Camouflaged caravan on the Coen River

peninsula jutting out into the water hole. Here we camped for a couple of days, catching up on washing and cleaning. It was while cleaning (bashing a mat against a tree) that I was attacked by a swarm of paper wasps. My face was a bit of a mess, John took me to the local emergency service, where they calmed me down, iced my face, took my bloods pressure and rang (Royal Flying Doctors) RFD in Cairns. Luckily, I had been taking antihistamines as a precaution for sandflies, so with plenty of that in my system, I did not swell up too much. RFD suggested I take another that night, but all was good, and I did not go back to anymore

cleaning that day.

We met some delightful little locals, who were swimming with their music teacher. They asked us if our caravan was bogged. We told them no, that we had just dug some sand out to make the van level. “No, you bogged!” they retorted. The music teacher told us they were from the Lama-Lama community, who we were to learn later, were very gentle

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people. A bit later, one of the boys (who apparently is school captain in Coen) was lighting fires. Mr Music Teacher asked him where he got matches – he pointed to John!

The last morning at Coen, we noticed the water level was a lot higher than what it had been, in fact, lapping at the caravan wheels – we learnt that ground water rises on a full moon, so we decided it was time to move on before we were flooded in – and bogged. The drive out offered challenges – getting out of the now wet sand, turning right, then driving through a cutting to get up on to hard ground. When John originally drove in, I wish I had the video recording, as the van swayed left as the 4wd went to the right, and rocked and rolled around quite a bit. I had the video ready for the return trip, but it was quite uneventful. I really have great confidence in John's ability to move this rig.



The way out!

From Coen, we once again headed off the PDR, finding a track into Port Stewart. At the end of this 65km gravel road, we found a little fishing community in the middle of indigenous land. We camped there for a couple of nights, enjoying the stars and a camp fire, punctuated by the rumbling of the generators keeping the freezers going for the fisher folk. It could have been idyllic, we enjoyed the peaceful days.

We checked in at the Lama Lama Ranger's station and enquired about the road into Lakefield National Park. The ranger, a beautiful friendly girl, advised us that there were four creek/river crossings, what each one was going to be like, whether it be sandy, rocky, or water. She was spot on, and in no time we arrived in



Our campsite at Point Stewart

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Lakefield National Park. After a quick detour to Musgrave Station for water and fuel, we set up camp at Hann Crossing for three nights. We had pre-booked our sites, both here and at Old Laura, based on comments in WikiCamps. Someone had gone through posting site by site as to the size and suitability for caravans, which was great, cos National Parks web site only mention availability for camper vans and trailers. At Hann Crossing, our site beside the river could have fitted five caravans comfortably. We



We shared our camp site with Grant & Claire, Penny & Keith at Hann Crossing

shared the first night with two camper trailers (who had booked elsewhere) and the second and third nights with our friends Deanne and Dave, who were actually booked with their little tent on the huge site next door. David and Dea were on their way up. They had left their van in Lakelands and were tenting it! Certainly glad that we made the decision to take Dunmowin with us. My legs won't take climbing in and out of a small tent, my bladder refuses to work in long drop toilets. I am afraid I have rather become used to my creature comforts of my trusty home on wheels. Even though I love cooking out on an open fire.

Our choofer gets used regularly now, either on coals or flame (since going to the camp oven

festival last year) With David and Dea, we explored the area around the Hann River, before them heading off to the north, and us to continue our exploring south.

At Old Laura, our camp site was the size of several football fields, we shared one night with a small bus – support vehicle for a number of bicyclists who were travelling up by pedal power.

Old Laura Homestead has been preserved; some of the outbuildings still stand. It was established to supply cattle for the Palmer Gold Rush era of the 1870s, and is now part of the Lakefield National

Park. From Old Laura, we were able to duck into the township of Laura, about 30k away to top up on a few groceries, fuel and water.



David Dea & me - and our choofer

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Old Laura Homestead

Dave had told us about Catfish lagoon – we took a look and managed to get a couple of pretty good photos of some basking crocs – on the other side thankfully, and another camp at Horseshoe Lagoon, where three crocs patrolled the lagoon during the night – we could see their eyes in our spotlight!



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We moved on next day, and just sort of popped into Cooktown. Still very much on the cape, but I felt that the journey was almost over.

We cleaned the van (courtesy of the local car and truck wash) before checking out the James Cook Museum, visiting various waterfalls (Isabella, Endeavour, Trevethan) and heading out to Elim Beach to see the coloured sands. Wish we had heard about this bush camp earlier.



Owned by 92 year old traditional owner Eddie Deerling, he allows campers on his property beside the beach and visit his nearby coloured sands.

We lunched in his picnic area, and drove back to Cooktown.

Nearby is Point Archer, where there are some great places to camp alongside the ocean, if you are prepared to be blown away. That is our van on the headland, we were up at the lighthouse.



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We managed to squeeze in a couple of days between the really windy days, before being blown back into Cooktown, where we camped at the racecourse for a more days. With camping neighbours Bobby and Lorraine, we had one night “in town” where we bought fish and chips, set a table up with cloth, cutlery and wine and enjoyed sunset over the Endeavour River (another great eating our way around Australia moment).

Moving on, heading south, and planning to get as far as Wujal Wujal, the last of the bitumen on the Bloomfield Track and the location of the pretty Bloomfield Falls, we ended up at Home Rule, private property within Cedar Bay National Park.

Home Rule was bought back in 1902 by a couple of Irish Men, and a holiday lodge was set up. These days you can camp beside Home Rule Creek or hike up to Home Rule Falls – a steep, narrow but rewarding hike into the rainforest. We did the hike up one afternoon, and were in danger of having to clamber back down in the dark (until I took of my prescription sunglasses and realised we still had plenty of light).



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From Home Rule, we headed back out onto Mulligan Highway to Palmer River Roadhouse, where we camped for the night, and leaving the van there for the day, drove into the Palmer River Gold mining area – to a ghost town called Maytown. A beautiful drive on gravel and dirt, some a bit bumpy, some a bit lumpy.



Nothing is left at Maytown now, except for the paved gutters of the main street, and plaques indication that here was the hotel, a butcher, a shop, another hotel, another butcher, the school of arts, the baker, and another hotel. The only building in town is a replica of a mining hut which houses information about the area, and the visitor's book. We drove around the site for miles checking out old mining relics, mills, stampers and shafts. Fascinating considering that thousands would have been living here back in the 1870s, there were banks, schools, pubs, now, sadly, nothing is left.

From Palmer River, it was straight down the bitumen to Mareeba, where we stayed for a couple of nights at The Ringers Rest, before heading down to back Cairns to pick up the last of our belongings (left over from our house sit). It was now the end of August, and six weeks since we had left Cairns for our winter sojourn up the cape.

The Cape for us is by no means finished, September started more adventures, but I will finish this off now, get some photos in, and next time we are within internet range, get it emailed off.

In all, it took us six weeks to travel from Cairns to the tip and back.

Blue winged kookaburra



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Fish and Chips from Barramunchies, Weipa



Eating our way around Australia with Lorraine & Bobby from Victoria