

Southern Outback Safari—20th March '09

Day 1

My cousin Hugh, rang at 4am, to tell me he was on his way, and we were in the air by 7am, tracking on an IFR plan via Moree to Walgatt, where we landed for fuel and pit stop. Andrew & Joan Mladen were coming in behind us in KKV, so we had a can of beans each and waited for them. We then departed together, for Mildura, for our next fuel stop, tracking over Cobar.

We flew over some very Interesting scenery, on this leg, of red earth, green trees, and in one area, hundreds of contours, which looked to be planted with something. We thought maybe saltbush. Flew over the big hole at Cobar-will come back and land there one day. Mildura was a bigger place than expected, with thousands of acres of land cleared and cultivated to the north. Beautiful terminal, coffee much appreciated. After fuelling up at the Av-gas bowser, we flew back north 38nm to Lake Mungo. Trevor UZX, and Tony in MEG had landed. A well maintained gravel strip, awaited us, with nil wind. John Ward and Jim Barry came over from Swan Hill just to say hello which was really great.

The resort has recently been rebuilt, with beautiful and modern accommodation and hotel/ restaurant area. Fred Morgan FLG, and Trevor UAW arrived. We all enjoyed a nice cup of coffee, then found a nice drop of Coopers Sparkling ale, which set the tone of the evening. Tony organized a bus, so early dinner (daylight saving) then out to the “Wall of China”, a unique range of sand hills, that formed on the edge of the inland sea, which dried out over 20,000 years ago. Hugh, John, Barney and I raced ahead to get to the sand hills before dark and reveled in such beautiful sand. John bought over a six pack of his Bulga estates wine which went down well.

Day2

After a nice breakfast, we all boarded the OKA (large 4WD) for another trip out to the sand dunes called the “Wall of China” Had a very knowledgible guide in Grahame from outback tours, whose hobby is paleontology. He showed us a termite nest (underground) and how the people who lived here over 20,000 years ago, used the material for making a fireplace. Told us about Mungo man, and Mungo woman, the remains of which were found nearby in 1996 (I think), and was not backward in telling us that he was a different species to the aborigine’s who claim to have been here at that time. Lake Mungo was named after a common Scottish name, and doesn’t mean meeting place (as the visitor’s centre would have us believe). It was a fresh water lake, with an average depth of 25 ft. approx 27 miles across. Full of fish, birdlife, and surrounded by trees and life. The rivers that ran into it were diverted approx 20,000 yrs ago, probably by an earthquake. We found remains of “periwinkles, egg shells from birds three times the size of an emu, bones of hairy nose wombat-freshly uncovered after recent rain-)

Went to the visitor centre, but didn’t learn much here about the area, as it is operated by the owners (or caretakers) of the park, which is an indigenous company. The woolshed was really great. An incredible walk back in time, to the era of the huge pastoral lease’s that once existed right across the country, after white settlement. Built in 1870, by Chinese workers, who probably came out to make a living at the gold diggings, the shed was lucky to survive to new caretaker’s desire to have it bulldozed.

Dinner that night was in the beautiful, modern dining centre, with millions of moths, gathering on the doors and windows, wanting to join us..

Day 3

Next morning, after breakfast, we all left in a cloud of dust for a 2hr flight to Quorn. It wasn't planned to take that long - thanks to a 20 kt headwind.

Landed at Quorn, with just time to get into town and board the train for the "Pitchi Ritchi" historic railway trip from Quorn to Woolshed Flat

On return back to Quorn, I unpacked my new folding bike, to the amusement of some pilots, but soon had many asking for a ride. At 2.30 that afternoon we met back at the railway workshop for a 2 hr tour of the huge facility there. They have four working steam locos, several large diesels, and restored rail cars, plus at least another dozen or so on line for restoration.

Back to pub for a couple of "James Squire" dark lagers, and dinner of yummy grilled kangaroo. Plenty of toot, tooting that night

Day 4

.Back at the airport, ready for another dusty departure for Olympic Dam airport, the airport that serves the huge BHP Billiton silver, lead, zinc and gold mine, and the associated town of Roxby Downs. Tony couldn't get permission to land at Woomera, due to some testing taking place, so he had organized a small bus and 4wd Pajero for the 90km drive to Woomera. I gladly volunteered to drive the Pajero, so Hugh and I had a Pajero loaded to the hilt with luggage, for the drive to Woomera.

Woomera was established in 1947 (a very good year), as a Joint Project with the UK for testing experimental rockets and missiles of all types. Since 2001 BAE systems Australia Pty Ltd, were awarded the contract for the operation of the range and the servicing of the town of Woomera. We stayed at the former barracks, and accommodation site for scientists, now converted to a well kept Hotel, called the ELDO Hotel (I think the only one in the town) It was named after the European Launch Development Organization. Originally, a residential area for scientists. Perhaps Julius Sumner Millar stayed here?? After lunch we went to the visitor's centre, which was all about rockets, and not aboriginal culture, which was a nice change. There is a large out-door museum, featuring many of the rockets & weapons tested at Woomera during the last 50 years. Dinner that night, was pizza's at the bowling ally (a leftover from the USA (NASA) presence during the 60's).

After an early morning walk, and breakfast, we drove back to Roxby, and Olympic dam airport for our next adventure, to Coober Pedy. The day was overcast, with a front coming through from the west. We had a relatively free day planned, for Coober Pedy, so we (Hugh & I) decided to go via Maree & William Creek to take in a couple more of historic places on the way. Had a beautiful cruise (north east) to Maree @ 500ft AGL with some spectacular scenery, and a 15kt tail wind. But, while listening in, heard the anguish of the other five planes in our group, getting fairly hammered into Coober Pedy, as they hit the front coming through. Heard that night (after a few wines) that Andrew got tipped right over, and Joan ended up on his lap. (or was it some of their luggage)

William Creek pub. He was one of those people who can collect rubbish, and turn it into a work of art, or incorporate it into a beautiful (cactus garden)

Jimmy also took us to the mine sites, which are only open to holders of a mining permit, as Coober Pedy is surrounded by over 500,000 open holes, one metre or bigger in diameter, and over 30 meters deep. The golden rule of working out there is “don’t walk backwards” Many people have met their death taking photo’s, walking back to get that good shot, only to end up down a shaft. The tour also included a trip out to the ancient sea bed, known as the breakaways , and to the longest fence in the world the 5,300 km dingo fence.

We all agreed the tour was very good value, as our knowledge of the work, politics, people, and geology of the area was fulfilled. Dinner that night was at Tom & Mary’s Greek Restaurant.

Got a flat on my bike, so had to replace the tube. Very enjoyable riding around town. Rode my bike out to the airport, for morning exercise, and had the plane ready to roll, when Hugh arrived with our luggage in the bus. I had decided to go a slightly different route via Oodnadatta, another little town that became less important when the new railway bypassed it, but it still exists to serve the many tourists, and local indigenous brothers that live in the area. We heard beforehand about the “pink’ roadhouse, and pink car that exist at Oodnadatta, so when we sighted a pink Volvo at the airport, we hitched a ride back to town to have a visit. The chap who drove the old pink Volvo was Adam Plate, who runs the roadhouse with his wife Lyn. A couple of years ago there was a rural reporter on ABC Southern Downs , Alice Plate (pronounced plarter), who had often commented on radio that she came from Oodnadatta, and her parents owned the roadhouse there, so it was lovely to meet them. Her mother had the same distinctive sounding voice as her daughter. Hugh asked Adam what’s to see in Oodnadatta, to which he replied, “Poverty, Desperation, and third world living conditions”, and, typical in a lot of inland towns, the only industry is the “aboriginal industry” But it is a little community in the centre of a big red and brown land , with a well kept railway, museum, and plenty of history. Not to be missed, by any fair dinkum traveler .

From Oodnadatta we flew slightly south of a direct track to Innaminka to fly over the centre of Lake Eyre. We had no trouble finding the water, but there is still a lot of lake to cover, before it would be even close to being full. The colours were incredible. Got down low for a close look, then back over the sandhills, and over the gas fields of the Moomba region and landed at Innaminka, mid afternoon, with the temperature in the mid 40’s. A walk for most (ride for me) down to the causeway., where the road crosses the Cooper, which was running nicely, provided some great entertainment watching thousands of fish trying to swim upstream over the crossing, with plenty of crows, hawks, shags, and even a dingo, making the most of an easy lunch of fish , in all sizes. Around five o’clock we all boarded (another) OKA for a trip out to Burke’s grave, about a 15 min drive along the Cooper from Innaminka. The ride took us out to some very ordinary, “moonscape” type of country, and back to a beautiful part of the Cooper, with a magnificent stretch of water, lined with beautiful river gums, and coolibah trees. We were all filled with the thoughts of that tragic episode of the ill fated Burke & Wills exploration, having just flown over a lot of the lonely, desolate country they had walked over to get to this place back in 1860. Then after walking for almost another six months up to the Gulf and back,

to this same lonely stretch of river to die of starvation. His grave site is marked by a simple marker under a proud, old coolabah tree. The day was still hot, so it took many more beers to put out the thirst, before dinner, and then retired to our rooms to try and sleep, with a noisy “Cat” power generator, roaring away all night out in the yard, keeping the air-con’s working, and every outside light blazing away, just to keep Innaminka on the map I suppose.

Next day we started with a ten minute flight down the Cooper, to Nappa Merrie “dig tree” site and airstrip. Unfortunately, some of us got lost, and lined up for the Nappa Merri station air strip, which led to some confusion as to where we all were in the small air space above the “dig tree”, but we all managed to get down safely, and only land once. The same sandflies that attacked me the last time I came to this site were still there again. How the members of Burke’s party stayed there for over five months, with out going *completely* mad I can only wonder about. The loneliness and desolation of that place has to be seen to even begin to imagine what it was like back in 1860. The river was grand, with an abundance of fish and game, but with the 200 ton’s of supplies that Burke set out with, any means of catching a fish was overlooked, and they despised the food that the local blacks were doing quite well on. From Nappa Merri we set off for Tibooburra via Noccundra which was a 35 minute flight over some spectacular Cooper, Channel country, with water in probably 50% of the channels. All towns should be as aircraft friendly as Noccundra, as it was great to taxi out onto the highway, and park in front of the hotel, while we had lunch.

Another 45 minutes South East and we landed at the Tibooburra airstrip, and settled into our accommodation at a much bigger town this time (a two pub town) The beer was just as good in either of them. This sadly, was our last supper together on this trip, with many highlights talked about over many glasses of good (sweet) red.

Back out at the airport we fuelled up with our allocated 200 litres of fuel each, which was ample to get the Skylane’s and the Crusader back to Bourke for full fuel. The Captain of the Single Comanche electing to head to Cunnamulla for fuel, one Twin Comanche tracking for Mildura, and the other for Rand.

A three hour direct flight from Bourke took us over Lightning Ridge, Mungindi, Wyalla feedlot and home.

Another very enjoyable and well planned flying safari coming to an end, thanks to Tony & Angela of “Aussie Fly-Aways”

Bruce Fanning
VH-BVF