

# THE WEST AUSTRALIA TRIP

Departure time was set for 6 am on Wednesday morning the 26th. Both cruisers were loaded and ready to go the previous evening. We planned to fuel up at the first service station on the Western highway and thus give us each a full fuel load to start the trip.

Wednesday morning arrived, and as usual we were late leaving. After a quick breakfast we were on the road at 8 am heading west.

Due to the dropping out of one of our party we were only three and decided the best system would be to change drivers every two hours to give each of us four hours at the wheel. It proved to be just about the right timing. The Cruisers had enough fuel on board to travel to the Isa without topping up and this extra fuel capacity proved to be very useful throughout the trip allowing us to plan fuel stops to suit the fuel price. We knew from experience the most expensive was usually at the most remote places and vehicles with limited capacity had to pay the penalty of vastly inflated fuel prices. The use of a cruise control on both vehicles allowed us to travel at the same speeds and obtain similar fuel usage.

Checks of economy showed both vehicles were attaining about 24 to 25 MPG in the old terminology, or about 8Km/litre in new terms travelling at close to 90kmh. Not all bad when you consider the 12 ft. tinney on top and close to a tonne on each vehicle.

We had some trouble with Doc's trailblazer fridge before departure and with the help of Norcoast refrigeration were able to determine the faulty part. Norcoast were to ship the part to Mt. Isa for us to pick up next day and we would fit it into the fridge before leaving the Isa. Fortunately all went according to plan and the fridge was back on line cooling some very important little 375mL bottles for later use. The phone assistance given by Norcoast was very quick and accurate and the forwarding of faulty components was really appreciated.

Our second stop was some 900kms from Isa past the three ways by about 150K's. We pulled off the road up a little used track, rolled out the swags and camped for the night. Next day we were once again on the way another 900 or so K's we were at Timber creek caravan park in Western Australia. Timber creek is a small community of mostly aborigine people and is situated on about the last bend of the Victoria river easily accessible by vehicle. On arrival we were informed about a fishing competition that was on the coming weekend and after much plying with drink we agreed to enter the comp basically to assist the Katherine game fishing club, The competition was to be run under similar rules to ANSA and GFAA using line class to determine fish size eligibility.

I must admit we didn't try very hard as the day time temperature was approaching 40 degrees. Bit hard to take when one is on holidays.

Our first day at the Mighty Vic was uneventful, no fish and we saw only one small croc on the bank. Second day similar; third day same again. with no croc. In three days we saw two crocs, one jabiru, one wallaby, two brologas and one pikey bream, some small catfish and nothing else. The wildlife here is practically non-existent compared with other little used areas we have visited. Even at night very few sounds of fish life were heard. Later, at the weighin about four Barra were weighed and they were caught some 50 kilometres down stream from the ramp at Big Horse creek. No wonder we couldn't do much good. Professional fishermen fish the river system fairly heavily though given the size of the river this should have little effect on fish numbers. Peter O'Brien of O'Brien boats in Townsville will be pleased to hear one of the somewhat dilapidated pro boats is called "OB1". I am sitting here pounding away at the keyboard whilst brother and Doc are having a look further up the Victoria river for some rapids we have heard about. A call from them on the UHF CB advises the rock bar as such is almost impossible to pull the boat over and after walking some distance up the river banks nothing fishable could be found.

That afternoon we packed up the boats in readiness for departure the next day. The plan was to stop at Kununurra and visit a couple of the anglers we met at the Mighty Victoria river. We stayed the first night at Lake Argyle caravan park after the mandatory cooks tour of the largest man made lake in Australia. The scenery on the trip into the lake is simply superb. Tall cliffs and mesa escarpments nearly all the way added to the grandeur of nature's display.

The fishing industry at the dam is the Silver Cobbler, alias the forktail catfish, The local hostelry had Silver Cobbler on the menu at \$15.00 and rump steak at \$12.50. The steaks were great !!!.

The next day saw us at El Questro station to sample some of the marvels we had seen on a recent television production. What a let down, certainly not up to expectations. Fishing was non-existent except if one took the Helifishing trip at around \$150.00 per person per half day.

The camping spot allocated to us was beside a barely running very shallow billabong containing a few fish about 4 inches long and thankfully a couple of cherabin only slightly larger than the fish.

We fished Chamberlain Gorge using our electric outboard, as petrol motors were not allowed. Scenery was once again great however fishing was non-existent. The sounder saw a total of two fish for the two days we fished. After a couple of days relaxation we decided to head out and return to Kununurra after having a hot shower at the station. Would you believe no hot water at the El Questro showers.

A recommendation to those wishing to spend time at El Questro, Always wear footwear, they have probably the most species of prickles ever to be seen, or

felt, anywhere. A further recommendation to prospective anglers contemplating fishing El Questro, Don't bother unless you have mobs of dollars available.

Back to Kununurra to talk to a couple of the local sports fishers.

Kununurra is populated by mostly Aborigine people and is the centre for the Ord River scheme. The farming around the area is quite unbelievable, almost anything grows and with unlimited water, coupled with excellent all round weather conditions, the output is dramatic. Locals say the area could produce the same amount of sugar cane as the whole of North Queensland and still have thousands of acres left for other varieties of farm produce. We saw rows of greenery where the perfectly level crops went for over 2 Kilometres without a stop. All irrigation is by gravity without the need for pumping. Anyway back to the fishing, even though farming starts with "f" and finishes with "ing" it is not one of my favourite pastimes.

As it is with Townsville fishing, local knowledge is usually the best method of getting results. Not too many of the locals were around town though fortunately we had the name of one of the long time anglers who gave us some pointers. We headed out to the Keep river, about 80Kms from town. On arrival we encountered many Kms of soft sand and rough dirt road before coming to the river. Talk about different to what we are used to, it looked just like the Suez Canal, no mangroves no structure at all for as far as one could see. Mud banks up to five metres wide with the last two to three metres very soft and sloppy. After a short period of investigative fishing Doc made the decision for all of us, "Lets get out of here and get back to what we know".

We decided to head for the Roper river bar and travelled back on Highway No.1 to Katherine to restock the larder and then on to Roper Bar via Mataranka.

The Roper Bar store people were as friendly as ever and offered the use of the caravan park at very reasonable rates. We settled in and looked forward to a few days of R&R. If we caught fish then that would be a bonus. Need I say we had no bonuses. As usual we were about two weeks late with reports of over 400 Barra taken during the Easter weekend. This river would have the best snag assortment we have ever seen, They range from the small sunken tree to large outcrops of heavy timber. The river varies in depth from the usual one metre to well over twenty metres in some places.

Friendly crocs inhabited the estuary and were obviously used to becoming film stars on video. The largest we saw was about 2 metres long and in spite of the comforts of the park three days later we were once again on the road to the Towns river. Camp was set up on the high rocky bank about 1 kilometre in from the road. Camp sites were at a premium with visitors as far afield as Melbourne and West Australia. We Managed to establish a very good site away from most of the other anglers. Our fishing prowess was maintained with an almost total lack of barra, we did catch other species such as Queenies, Javelin, Salmon, and of course catfish.

Disappointment fuelled our desire to continue further east to the Limen Bight river system. Memories of good fishing in the past kept our hopes high. Memories also of the most fierce sandflies and other varied insect pests were also with us. The drive in to the site from Nathan River Station took only two and a half hours for the 53 Kilometres. Much better than last time and the "road", (I use the term loosely) had obviously been scraped with a dozer and the Nathan river crossing on this occasion was a breeze compared with previous years.

On arrival at our usual camp site one other well established camp had already been set up by four anglers from Brisbane. They informed us fishing was good and there were no dreaded insect pests other than very friendly fly's. Even they disappeared around dusk leaving us able to sit out in the open to enjoy the evening scenery.

Our fishing began in earnest and the first trip was down to our aptly named jew hole where we had found fish some two years ago. Once again fish were here in good numbers, black jew, grunter, bream, salmon, catfish, queenies and fingermark. The next few days were spent visiting those sites we found on previous trips. All with good results. The crocs were nowhere near as prolific as last time however one local resident of better than 3 metres hung around the camp every night. We spent a few very enjoyable evenings with these four very well set up Southern anglers and I for one was impressed by their knowledge of the Northern Territory and their obvious love of the outdoors. Their method of fishing the area also impressed me, Three went out on the well setup boat whilst one stayed at the camp doing the chores and keeping a watchful eye on things during the day. Not a bad system.

Need I say the fishing improved dramatically and we started to enjoy fish and crab for our evening meals. We fished almost every day with good results of estuary species, and managed about 15 different species for the trip. Fishing is limited by the tides and though it takes some time to work them out it pays to keep a watch and record tide movement. My Rothery's tide and fish master proved accurate for most of the tide movement after one took into account the

distance up the river. Bait was fairly easy to catch though at times we had to travel to get results.

Our last visit to this area saw an abundance of crab pots at the mouth and this time was no different. Professional crabbers have licences to cover the area. They also have associated bait collection licences for the pots that allow them to net the river system. Fortunately the Barra can read and do not get caught in these bait nets during the closed season.

After about five days the Brisbane guys had decided to shift camp to Massacre inlet and we also had decided to move out the same day and started to pack up the night before. One incident I must mention is when Doc decided to dump some fish frames out in the centre of the creek away from the camp site. Brother Dick had emptied both boats of all the build up of fishing tackle and associated gear including both fuel tanks and fittings. Docs headed out into the creek and the engine stopped about in the middle of the creek, out of fuel. Docs cries of help went almost unheard as the generator was running and drowned out his cries. The Brisbane guys didn't help much as all they could do was ask Doc for the keys of his car and other items of his equipment as he would not require them any more. Doc however convinced them to arrange a tow and I headed out to relieve one very distressed retired doctor. Well he wasn't really distressed, just cranky at himself for forgetting the tank had been removed from the boat.

Overall the trip was great, good company, good fishing at the finish, and very little trouble with the vehicles. A total of three punctures and no blowouts made us very happy. Our experience with tyres in the past helped with the low rate of failures as we now run good quality tyres of the 750 X 16 variety. Experience has shown the wide balloon type of tyres are totally unsuitable for rough roads. Talks to others with balloon tyres once again confirmed our choice of 16 inch tubed radial tyres. One driver had blown three new tyres in 57 kilometres of the Gibb River road and was extremely doubtful he would get back to the sealed road. Needless to say he had balloon tyres and had only about 30 psi in them. I suggested he put about 55 psi in the tyres to get the walls away from the rocks, he commented that the ride would be somewhat rougher, I suggested the ride would be smoother than running on the rims and he had to agree. We gave him a few hints and he planned to get tyres better suited to the roads as soon as he could.

No engine problems with the vehicles though a few problems with the 12 volt portable alternator, These were mainly due to poor design and were sorted out by some rearrangements to wiring. This didn't worry us too much as we run a fully 12 volt camp and even if the portable alternator failed completely we still had two vehicles with alternators to top up batteries.

We travelled a total of just over 6000 kilometres and the difference in fuel use between the vehicles was only five litres, And that's because I travelled to the bore to top up our water supply half way through our time at the last camp site.

Costs were about \$2000.00 total including all fuel, food etc. and when one splits this up over the five week break and between three anglers, it is probably cheaper than at home.

This time our venture included a well made insect proof tent rather than the usual tarpaulin over the camp. Memories of past invasions by hordes of biting, itching insects prompted the softie approach. I would recommend taking a tent to anyone planning to stay at one camp site any more than a couple of nights as a good nights sleep is a must to enjoy your holiday to the fullest. Another consideration is even though those insects seem to visit at night other unwelcome visitors may find your swag inviting during the day. A zip up tent has definite advantages.

Our camp this year also included one of the new Coleman portable kitchens, They sure make life in the bush a lot easier, cleaner, and healthier. One small point Mr. Coleman, how about making it to suit the average Aussie, we all felt the whole thing was about 100mm too low, this made its use a bit back breaking and we had to lift the level with blocks to stop the complaints from the cook, and the bottle washer.

What a great trip, I cant wait till I retire and can do this more often.