

Larapinta Vignettes – July 2007

Trip anticipation:

Full waterholes with good camping nearby, and perhaps the opportunity for a swim in lieu of a sponge bath. Relatively difficult walking but not excessive and plenty of time to admire the view. Chilly temps, but not really.

Reality:

Instead of waterholes..... puddles (or nothing) A night not near water necessitated 30 litres of water for dinner, breakfast and morning walk. Then the walking was that of pack horse or mule! A substantial tide mark indicated our visit.

Instead of admiring the view ...survival was the key word. The rocky ground necessitated our minds being alert to navigate a course on or around mobile rocks and to avoid the sharp and penetrating Spinifex needles.

Some morning temp in the negative with ice on the fly.

Countryside:

It was akin to walking through an Albert Namatjira painting of starkly beautiful landscape. The flora was variable and the fauna was generally invisible or absent. Much of the land was like tramping around Fred Flintstone's quarry. Big rocks, small rocks, unstable rocks, we had the lot and all placed to test knees and ankles. The skies were clear with occasional light clouds. Morning walking found the air crisp and pleasant with the afternoons very warm.

Wildlife:

As mentioned before not a lot of wildlife showed its face but we did have two consecutive nights of dingo howling whilst around Ormiston Pound. This haunting chorus came from across the pound and lasted for 5 minutes or more and was quite beautiful. Not exactly out of tune but in a weird way, in tune. On our very last morning packing up from Serpentine two Major Mitchell cockatoos flew overhead and landed some distance away. It was as though they were seeing us off.

Night skies:

The beauty, often masked by the full moon, accompanied us for a week. Don pointed out the full moon had an image of a spotted quoll and when the full moon was in the west it looked like the possum symbol of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife. **He also said the Aborigines also studied the constellations but were the only peoples to have focused on the areas without stars. The constellation described by them known as the emu is made up of the areas devoid of stars extending from the Coal Sack of the Southern Cross with the head, extending over towards Scorpio with the body and then the legs.**

With the moon out of the way, the sky was spectacular and the milky way lived up to its name. Each night we watched the progress of Saturn and its relationship to Venus and Jupiter to Antares. Scorpio dominated the constellations. The ISS (international space station) arrived and departed on time appearing as one of the brightest lights in the night sky. Occasional falling stars were seen.

Our guide Don Butcher:

Is a skilled and friendly young man with a great love of outback Australia, its geology, flora, fauna and of all things astronomical. Don demonstrated his considerable talent with map and compass which he supplemented from time to time with his newly acquired GPS. He went to considerable lengths to ensure our safety and to reveal the best of the West Macdonnell Ranges. Don is a passionate young man concerned about the environment and the indigenous peoples of northern Australia.

Not only was he skilled in the bush but he demonstrated considerable flair in the kitchen. A battle of wills was fought on most evenings over the quantity of chilli to be added to our meals (self medicating was found to be the best). When we did have pudding, he demonstrated artistic skills in converting white rice into purple rice (with the addition of Ben's 'scrogin'). He won our hearts when on two occasions he produced a bar of Lindt chocolate. Being the consummate diplomat, we were all involved in the democratic process. ie: should we go here, there and at what time. Who cared, we were all on holidays!

Extraordinary feats:

Pound wall: This seemingly easy ascent (aided with notes from the previous guide) ended up as a challenge some of us could have done without. Our ascent up a steep hill with stable rocks, soon descended into a scramble up loose shale on all fours with dangerous consequences for the person beneath. The party by this time had broken into three groups. The situation was best described as transversing an avalanche waiting to happen. Two thirds of the way up we were relieved to wrap ourselves around and under a pine tree which seemed to be firmly anchored into the unfriendly environment. We finally made it to the top to be welcomed by the most spectacular view and the passing shadow of a wedgetail eagle made it all seem worth while. The descent was optional in terms of speed and without a side wall to hang onto, the bottom could have been achieved rather rapidly with untold consequences. Down at the bottom while rescuing a butterfly, Jane managed to make a surprising entry into the only pool of water on site. She enjoyed it so much she descended to her waist and after uncaring brutes took their photographs, they pulled her out.

Mt Giles (the challenge)

An early start to arrive at the base of the spring in good time to ascend, descend and be back in time for afternoon tea. Rosemary's assessment was perfect, and she relaxed around the permanent spring fed pool with John's book for the day whilst the hearty intrepid climbers headed for the summit. One third of the way up the NW wind howled and tore at clothes, John and Jane decided that discretion was the better part of valour and found a sunny spot out of the wind to await the return of the valiant four. By 1.30pm they came loping down to regale all with their achievement. On hearing the tale no one regretted their decision.

The adventurers (the punters): Chronological order

Willie the wily Austrian led from the front in the first week. Only once did he go astray. We were not sure if he was trying to head home when he tried to lead John away from Hugh Gorge. (sorry Willie, we're writing this story!!) Willie was a good member of the team with a mischievous sense of humour and a willingness to help. He was in charge of the fire and each morning we were greeted with boiling water for our tea and our breakfast.

John superseded Willie in the 2nd week with fire lighting duties. John had a preference for 'bison' fires (a reflection of his childhood arson tendencies). He is expecting the bill Russell will no doubt send for the melting of the plastic handle on Russell's favourite pot. John was in his glory when reminiscing of his exploits of terrorising cats with tomthumbs tied to tails. (His eyes lit up as he described the frenetic dance of the family cat) He also seemed to be proud of the fact that he could blow up pensioner's letterboxes with tuppenny bungers. Our resident psychiatrist informed us that John had all the necessary characteristics of a homicidal maniac. As well as the aforementioned he was hopeless at calculating his food portions for a week and had to scam from the ever kind Ben (picking on the young and vulnerable) to supplement his diet when his meagre supplies finally ran out on the 2nd last day. The end result was a very successful weight watchers programme with the loss of 7 kgs and two notches in the belt. (Jane p.s. 'the skite'!)

Jane Her early morning ear glued to the radio announcing news of the world. Always non complaining but showing evidence of the cold with blue extremities and multiple layers of clothing. Her first weeks chilling experience was resolved by the purchase of an \$80 booster bag liner guaranteed to raise the temperature by 6 degrees. It actually worked, and Don was grateful to take it on the next trip to Kings Canyon. Jane says she has a map in her head but was unable to explain how she managed to lead Ben and Eva back to our previous days starting point at Ormiston Gorge! Don and Guillaume managed to find the errant group with cooees and Rosemary's whistle and returned the chastened group to the fold. She managed a good tumble, with pack, which wrecked her shorts and on the very last day mislaid her walking pole. ? age starting to show?

Eva (one of the late entrants) demonstrated her unbelievable fitness from the word go and her self discipline as her feet but not her boots, began to fall apart. Eva's wonderful relationship with her son and her pride in her family was evident to all.

Rosemary (the lightness of being "the titanium queen") she enlightened one and all with her spectacularly lightweight gear which had been tested from the arctic to the desert and never found wanting. Rosemary had the common connection with Toowoomba which many of us shared. She has been a very long term client of Russell's going back to Russell's Walkabouts both in Australia and overseas.

Guillaume (also known as G, Geom, Geam, Gemo, Gema and on one rare occasion, Gismo! John is so-o-o stupid with names!!!!)

Our resident Norman and self confessed bank robber (international banking) now retired at the age of 37. (We all felt a spot of envy) G was a wonderful member to our team being our eyes as he scouted the way ahead. He was willing and carried more than his share of the weight. His equipment set the tone despite his lack of titanium. He was able to keep us informed of the night's minimum temp (-2.5C) and his charcoal filtration system was invaluable. (We realised if the worst came to the worst we could all recycle our urine)

Ben (Thorpie's nemesis with the appropriate costume, flipper feet and flapper hands)

He was the group jester, a magician producing out of his magic pack, a constant supply of all things sweet, tasty and more-ish. We are uncertain of what he cannot do because all challenges were met graciously with never a complaint. He was never short of a response except when asked about his relationship with his sister Leah, he strangely became speechless. We feel he has the makings of a future leader of his generation.

The unexpected:

Brinkley's Bluff was the setting of a startling event, the flying tent. Not necessarily something any of us would like to participate in, but when one's tent is new AND very expensive, desperation can achieve amazing things. John became aware of vague noises emanating from Don and Jane, and pointing fingers directed him to his tent behaving much like a box kite with turns, dives and ascents. John gave all a grand display of agility as he plucked the errant tent out of the sky. In fairness to him, there had been no wind until he turned his back to retrieve the fly, but someone out there was watching.....

The puddings:

Much has been made of the three course dinners provided by Willis Walkabouts. They were eagerly anticipated by one and all and the disappointment on the faces of the punters was manifest when Don had the temerity to say that he had none! The only time in our humble little lives when we need pudding! BUT he did redeem himself with painted rice.

Personal hygiene (Keith from the Emu Run unkindly referred to us as polecats)

Wet ones (top and tail), were never big enough to minimise the stickyness one experienced in the sleeping bag. Some of us could manage with one whereas the daintier types needed at least three.

Intermission: (Alice Springs changeover)

We had a brief three hours in which to race about procuring supplies and hoping to ease the personal situation with a shower. Willie came to the fore when he kindly gave John, Jane and Guillaume the opportunity to luxuriate in his bathroom. The bliss of soap, shampoo and hot water on that occasion will long live in memories. Jane could not face another week in the same shirt so purchased a new one, along with the aforementioned thermal bag liner. John required more personal items, namely one single toilet roll and some tissues. Not being one to habituate grocery shops, he was sadly let down when it became apparent that toilet rolls came in pairs, fours or sixes, definitely not ones. Rosemary was able to satisfy her personal requirements on our fleeting visit to town then had a memory lapse when she left her lunch cheese in the hostel fridge.

First aid (as administered by the psychiatrist or worsethe pathologist!)

The offending items were ill fitting boots, resulting in blisters, soggy toes, feet and Spinifex with punctures and fine splinters. Luckily there were no sprains, broken bones or spirits. The pathologist looked like a character out of Oliver Twist in grubby clothes and insincere smile as he said: 'this won't hurt' (Fortunately he didn't have black teeth) and we all felt for Eva when she consulted him the day he was dressed in a sarong. What skills he had left were applied to the coaxing out of splinters and the relief of blisters and soggy feet by the use of bandaids and plasters (which promptly fell off). His final recourse was to recommend patience because all would be well when we returned to civilisation

Final comments

A memorable trip, wonderful new friends and plenty of tales to reminisce on in the nursing home. (so says John)

Jane Searle and John Mayze

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