

## *Lake Eyre and Cooper Creek, August/September 2010*

We decided at the conclusion of our Perth-to-Canberra journey in April to see Lake Eyre later in the year, but many others had the same idea, so when we tried to book a place on one of the Outback Spirit tours, which leave every four days, we learned that they were booked out until the end of September! The reason, of course, is that rains throughout the year in northern and eastern Australia, especially in Queensland, have brought a vast body of water through the Channel Country into Lake Eyre. It was last full (and spilling over) in 1974, and more recently was decently full in the early 1990s. But now is the time to go if one wants to see the phenomenon of a Lake Eyre full of water.

Not long after the bad news, however, Outback Spirit got in touch with us again and said that they had decided to put on an extra trip in late August, and we could go on it if we said so now. It was not an ideal time for us, but we did say so now, and secured our places. By the time we got to Adelaide for the start of the trip additional heavy rain had fallen in the Lake Eyre local catchment. Our driver and tour guide (Peter and Angie Hanes) told us that there might have to be changes to the schedule. But we set off in high spirits with another 24 people in the Mercedes 4WD bus (on a truck chassis, with the passenger seating very high up). This was our third long bus tour (NZ and Europe earlier) and we are by now reasonably experienced. There is always one person whom you wish had decided to go on some other tour, and it takes a day or two to sort out the people you feel most comfortable with. But it all worked, and we all got on well.

Much of the country we were to go through we had visited before. Our first night was in Port Augusta, which we had visited twice before. This time we stayed at the Standpipe Motel inside the golf course, whose dining room is in an 1870s stone mansion that has served many other purposes. The second night we spent in Marree, a little further north than we had ventured in the past. Here too the main building was an old stone pub, probably dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The bedrooms were out in the compound, and made from aluminium kits. The overnight temperature fell below freezing, and we were very cold (neither of us noticed that there was an air conditioner...)

After breakfast we broke into two groups, and Bev and I were in the first. Thirteen of us went to the airfield close by and piled into the biggest Cessna I have ever seen, one with a single turbo-prop engine. We flew for an hour or so northwards until we came to the top end of the lake, where we could see the Warburton Creek flowing through its 'groove' into the lake. Since the lake is below sea level, the water coming in at the top is flowing downhill, creating a hundred-metre wave that went for about ten kilometres through the groove (the groove has been shaped by these occasional floods. The pilot brought us down to 500 feet, so we could see it all easily, and then swung over the Warburton for quite a while, so that we could see the birds and the general topography. Then we travelled east to avoid a big swing in the course of the Creek, arriving above Cowarie Station, where we had expected to land. Oh, no. The strip was too wet, and indeed Cowarie was cut off from the world, because its entry road was covered with water in several places. There was water, water, everywhere. The flat terrain and the clay subsoil mean that the water collects into large shallow ponds and lakes. We headed off southeast,

over the desert for half an hour, and came to Cooper Creek, the other main source of water for Lake Eyre. The Cooper was much more impressive than the Warburton, but is slower, wider and forms into lakes. Here we finally landed at Ettadunna Station, and spent a most enjoyable hour there, having morning tea and learning about life on a sheep and cattle station miles and miles from anywhere. Sharon Oldfield, who gave us the talk, is actually the owner of Cowarie, and had been cut off from her own place for a week because of the water. The other thirteen of the bus complement were having a cruise on Cooper Creek. Peter the driver went off to get them, and load them into the plane, and when he returned and the plane had taken off, he took us to Cooper Creek, about 30 km further northeast.

Cooper Creek has a mythic quality about it, not simply because of Burke and Wills. It is dry, and then it is a vast sea. I have always wanted to see it, wet or dry. When we got to the creek, following the bypass road that led to the only way across, via a little (very little) punt powered by two outboards, I knew what I would see because we had flown over it. But the reality was grand. The creek was about 600 metres wide, five metres deep, and flowing at about four to five knots. The water colour was a creamy khaki. A line of 4WD + trailers waited patiently to get across, which involved the drivers' uncoupling the trailers and loading them, one at a time, onto a small truck, which was just small enough to fit on the punt and just large enough to carry a trailer. The trip cost \$50 for the trailer, but the cars went free. The speed with which all this was happening was about as slow as you can imagine. The convoy was off to the Birdsville races, cancelled later because of more rain. They may still be there...

We piled into a flat-bottomed tinny and went downstream into Lake Killamperpunna, on which a regatta had been held a little time before, and then upstream for several kilometres — about an hour and a half in all. It seemed as though there was always a river here, but indeed, the watercourse was bone dry only a few months ago, and people 'waited for the Cooper to arrive', which it certainly has done. If you look at any decent map of central Australia you will see that the Cooper started as the Thomson and the Barcoo Rivers in Queensland. At a few points in Queensland it splits into a myriad creeks, extending fifty or more kilometres wide, and at the moment all that land is covered with water, and it is still to arrive in Lake Eyre. The fall of land is very slight (an inch to the mile around the Darling in NSW), so it takes months for the water to get to Lake Eyre. The Warburton, for those interested in all this geography, is really an extension of the Diamantina, which begins south of Mt Isa, and carries more water than the Cooper, helped by the Georgina (which becomes the Eyre —yes, you can be confused). But the Diamantina seems to finish in a gigantic triangular swamp (the Goyder swamp) about 100 km long, just below the SA border with Queensland, and the Warburton is its continuation when there is water. There is an awful lot of it now. The flood plain of the Georgina is between 75 and 100 km wide... In short, heavy rain in central and southern inland Queensland has nowhere to go but head off to Lake Eyre, and the last time there was anything like this kind of inundation was twenty years ago. Enough of geography: I would put that day over Lake Eyre and along Cooper Creek into the top ten of my life.

The rest of the tour was thoroughly enjoyable but a little anti-climactic. We spent the night in a decent pub in Leigh Creek (a mining company town), and the next day and night getting to and staying in the Wilpena Pound, where we have been twice before. But it is a stunning place, and just as beautiful when you see it again. The day getting there was one of those magical sunny Spring days when everything looks wonderful — trees, flowers, rocks, the desert, the yellow-tailed rock wallaby, the lot. On the final day we went inland via Burra, which again we had enjoyed in the past, to Adelaide, where we had a farewell dinner in our pub. It was a first-class trip, and I doubt that we could have done much of it by ourselves — you really do need local knowledge and the right contacts. The outback pubs, the tour companies, the pilots — they're all doing marvellous business, thank you very much. And why not.

On the next day we went to the Goolwa Barrage near the mouth of the River Murray, which is open and connected to the Coorong, an enormous lagoon, but not to the River itself. The water behind the barrage was about 600 mm higher than the sea-water. Later that day and in the evening a lot of rain fell on Adelaide and its environs, and there was so much of it that the barrage was opened, and the dammed-up river flowed into the Coorong, at least for a little while.

On our trip home we had another fine dinner at Stefano da Pieri's Grand in Mildura, and did the 800 kilometres to Canberra the next day in ten hours. The prevailing colour throughout our journey was green. The desert was green and full of flowers. The One Tree Plain had been green in April and was lush in September. You could see why some early explorers sent back rave reports of the condition of the country. Around Wilpena it was simply magical. Because of the long drought there were not so many cattle or sheep as one might have expected, so the pastures were high and deep green, as were the early crops. Where you saw animals, they were in top condition. Cowarie's Sharon Oldfield complained to us that her cattle were perfect but they were on the other side of the Warburton, and there was no way they could get them to market. They now regarded the cattle as 'a self-managed herd'. The people at Ettadunna have obtained a commercial fishing licence for Lake Hope, about 40 km upstream. They are not allowed to catch the fish until the Cooper has fallen lower than the entrance to the Lake. But then they expect to harvest 300 tonnes of fish (all would die in due course as the oxygen level of the lake fell below that needed to sustain the fish).

And as a final twist to this memorable journey, heavy rain had fallen on the southern tablelands and slopes on the Saturday, and we were returning on the Sunday. Between Wagga and the Hume Highway we crossed four heavily flooded streams, Kyeamba, Tarcutta, Adelong and Muttama, a couple of them a kilometre wide, and one lapping the road bridge. Here too the colour of the green was reminiscent of Ireland.

Truly we live in a country of contrasts!

Don and Bev

14 September 2010