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Outback Time



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Nowhere to Nowhere



In California you can go to the most remote place and you will still pass a car about every mile or so, there were times where we did not pass a car for 50 miles. For me this was a treat to own the road for an hour with no one else around. When night hits everyone tells you to stay off the road as the kangaroos start coming out onto the road and they will do a number to a small car. The times we did drive at night we kept it less than 40mph so we had plenty of time to react to critters jumping out in front of us.

Looking back on the experience I can only imagine that 50 years ago here in Cali it must have been the same with small towns and empty roads.

Special Interest Articles:

- Going Batty
- King of the Road
- Precious Stones

A lot of nothing would probably best describe the vast expanse that is the Australian Outback. The land is dry to the bone with small pockets of vegetation clinging to their lifeline of water hidden beneath the soil. The land is broken up into giant ranches not measure in acres but in square miles. The ranches free range cattle by the 1,000's over areas the size of counties.

We entered this region with little more than a sedan and a poor map charging down the road in search of adventure. What we found was 1500 miles of dead kangaroos, very little civilization and trucks the size of trains running you off the road. The Outback is a hard place to

live and with the current drought that has plagued the area it is even tougher. Driving along you pass a town every couple of hundred miles so you make sure to gas up every chance you get. The towns themselves are very small and shut down at 5:00 and closed on the weekends which makes planning even more important.



Going Batty



Being watched from above.

We left Townsville on the Eastern coast of Australia and headed inland towards the open range. Our first overnight stop was Charters Towers a medium sized town on the edge of the Outback.

As we stopped the car at a local hotel we opened the door to the sight and sound of 5,000 screeching giant fruit bats that have inhabited the central park. Of course the immediate response is of pure amazement of the small dog sized flying rodents that have completely covered the sky as the colony slowing circles above the park and then makes its way towards the fruit trees outside of town to feed.

The giant flying fox bats are very intimidating flying over your head with their black leathery wings that can be more than 6 feet

wide. They originally came to the park about 6 months earlier and being a protected species the town was honored to have them roost in the trees. After a while more and more bats came and the big trees in the center of the parks started to die from all the droppings. Now the bats have moved to the outer areas of the park and are completely destroying the park from

there sure numbers. I walked into the park in the daytime when they are all asleep in the trees with their wings wrapped over their heads like Dracula mini-me's. The picnic tables, paths and playground areas were smothered in guano with a topping of bat carcasses scattered around the park from the diseased and wounded.



Story Time

There is no better place to get the local scoop than at



the local bar. Our bartender had more than a few stories to tell us of better times in the town of Winton – the place where the Waltzing Matilda was born. Winton is slowly turning into a ghost town with stores closing every month and people moving away looking for work.

Sitting there watching the locals pop in and out,

catching up on the news around town, you think back to a simpler time when we did not have all these devices such as cell phones, computers and satellite television. That is life here in Winton, it is slow and simple with the highlight of the day watching the clouds drift across the big blue sky.

King of the Road



The term road train could not be truer than when you pass one of these 400,000lb behemoths barreling down the highways. Our big rigs in the states are 18 wheelers but the Aussie versions come with 70 tire and rims which is quite the bargain unless you are a kangaroo hopping across the road.

The road trains are only found in the remote areas of Australia where there is very little traffic to deal with. As you get into the cities the trucks are limited to the standard 18 wheeler sized rigs. They travel huge distances across very arid regions with little or no truck stops so they are required to have massive tanks for fuel carrying up to 500 gallons of diesel.

When driving along and

you come up on one of these lengthy trucks you have to take a calculated approach to passing. The standard truck is about 75 feet long but these can reach over 200 feet making overtaking them very challenging.

The trains haul just about everything from gravel, livestock, fuel to supplies and most truck will have 3 trailers but 4 or 5 are not uncommon. When you pass one coming the



opposite direction it makes your car shimmy and shake as you get absorbed by the winds generated by its mass. If you are driving on dirt or gravel surface you need to pull off the road as far as possible and stop to let them go by as they spit rocks from the tires like bullets from a machine gun.

As we drove back towards the coast we were escorted off the road by the highway patrol as the biggest road train as approaching. There were two trucks hauling pieces of massive earth moving equipment that were so wide they took up the entire highway and the shoulders. The trailers must have had over 100 tires on them to support the weight and they required police escorts in the front and back to clear the roads.



“Checking the tire pressure, an all day job.”

Precious Stones



"Pick your stone – pick your town."

One of the best times Maddie had in the Outback was a visit to a Sapphire mine located in the town of Sapphire.. When you arrive you pay for 5 gallon buckets of dirt that they have removed from inside the mine shaft. Outside they have a table, wheelbarrow, washbasin and a screen. The first step is to take some dirt and place it in the screen and shake it a bit. This will remove all the sands and small pebbles. Then you wash the remaining material in the basin to clean off all the dirt and what you are left with is the gravel. Now you lay this gravel on the table and sift

through it to find the sapphires and before you know it you are filthy rich - well at least that is what the prospectors believe when they come here.

Maddie did however find some small sapphire that look like pieces of broken

colored glass. You will find all different colors of the stones and they are pretty small, it is fairly rare to find a big one. It is not until the sapphire is shaped and polished that it will become of a precious gem.



"Road kill in progress."

Road Kill

If there is one constant in the Outback it would be the littered bodies of dead kangaroos that are found one after another as you

travel down the highway. The Roos, as they are called by locals, scurry across the roads at night with no intent of stopping

or dodging vehicles. Now this is a mistake on their part as most cars and all trucks in the area have giant Roo bumpers designed to cause maximum Roo damage while leaving the vehicle complete intact.

In fact there were times while driving when we saw more than 10 kangaroos sleeping on the road in a 1 mile stretch.

