

# Aboard Sengo

# Kinquaaid

Aboard Sengo

April 2017

## Around Biggenden

Sometimes we are just a little too ambitious!

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## Around Katherine

Exploring Nitmiluk and Katherine Gorge by land, air and water

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The Overhang: Cania Gorge

## Full Circle

Back in Darwin – now for the big clean up!

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## The Road Trip Ends

At the end of April our four-month road trip in Kinquaaid came to an end. The 3327 kilometers we travelled in April was the final tranche of a 19,000 kilometer journey that has traversed six states or territories. In the last weeks of this land-based stint we climbed mountains, explored gorges, went underground with the bats and flew with the birds.

# Biggenden to Darwin

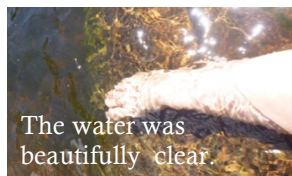
There are two main things I noticed in April. One, it hardly rained, and two, the days got shorter, and whereas a couple of months ago I would have been up when the cats asked for breakfast at a very light 0530, it is now not light until way after 0700 and I am getting up in the dark. We finally left Biggenden (when the locals let us go) and headed north, popping into Cania Gorge for a few days, and then Emerald for a few more. We had one night in Longreach and then a very long trip to Mount Isa where we were stuck waiting for the mail. From Mount Isa there were a series of hops west then north before a longer penultimate stop in Katherine. Our final and ultimate destination was Darwin and home to Sengo.

Sengo was of course, patiently waiting for us when we got back to the Northern Territory Capital, and I am sure (If the boat had thoughts) having sat through one cyclone warning and one near incident in April, looking forward to a big clean up. We gave ourselves a couple of days grace however, we needed to psych ourselves up for some scrubbing.



## Waterfall Creek

1<sup>st</sup> April 2017. The walk to Waterfall Creek south of Biggenden (part of the Mount Walsh National Park) is rated on the Queensland Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing (dnpsr) website as a Grade 4 (out of 5) walk (Grade 1 is easy) and on the Council written brochure as an easy walk. In reality the walk is probably somewhere in between. The Council brochure has other inaccuracies also, having the access turnoff from the Maryborough Road at 35 kilometers whereas in reality you turn at the 24 kilometer mark and then a right turn a further 2.5 kilometers along. This is actually correct but you don't know if you have got the right road as there is no road sign. Confusing directions aside, we parked in the overflow car park at the



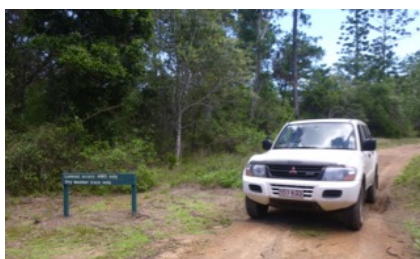
The water was beautifully clear.



end of the road (the main car park was up a waterlogged dirt track and whilst other cars got through, we didn't have any recovery gear and didn't wish to risk it) and walked to the start of the track. The walking track is dirty and rocky and took us around 30 minutes to get to Waterfall Creek, where a series of welcoming pools greet the hot and weary walker. The interps board recommends against swimming; the Council brochure suggests you can cool off but should be a strong swimmer. The second pool up from the end of the track is where we took a dip and there is that much of a circular current that I could do a full comfortable dog paddle and stay in the one spot. There were kids in the pool above us and they had fun coming down the waterfall into the back of our pool. There was a holidaying couple in the pool below us before a local family joined them. Apparently there are many pools and you can walk quite a way upstream to find your own little spot. My toe was still extremely sore however and I wasn't willing to walk any further than necessary. We enjoyed our dip and timed it well. Just as we got out a noisy group of around twenty turned up, complete with three dogs (in a National Park!). It was the first day of the school holidays so I guess we shouldn't have been too surprised. This is clearly a local hot spot. We left them to it.

Note the photo of my foot: whilst outside waterways were a muddy mess after ex Tropical Cyclone Debbie's downfall, Waterfall Creek was a picture of clarity.





## Good Night Scrub

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2017. The tourist drive around Good Night Scrub has no indication whether you need a 4WD or



View from Tourist Drive: Good Night Scrub



Track to top of One Tree Hill

not but one should definitely be recommended. Whilst in

dry conditions careful driving of a traditional sedan would make the trip, because of the water that ex Tropical Cyclone Debbie had dumped on the area, water crossings were at ford/bridge level or across the track. We were a little unprepared and had only the most rudimentary of touristy maps (something I would normally rue against) and took a chance on the 4WD only track to the One Tree Hill lookout – it was almost compulsory as we used to live on a ‘One Tree Hill Road,’ outside Melbourne. The view at the top however was almost non-existent. Clearly the ‘One Tree’ was some time ago and the bush had grown up around the pinnacle and blocked all but a small section of the scene. Lunch was at the one and only picnic table that we could see, unfortunately in the sun, overlooking the wild overflowing Paradise Dam (from the opposite side of the dam than we were at a few days before (see Aboard Sengo March 2017)). We avoided all tracks that suggested they

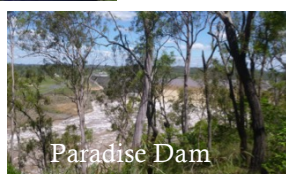


The top of One Tree Hill

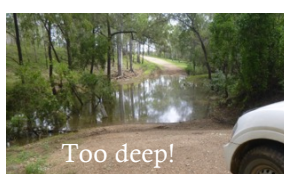
were only one-way tracks and took a more graded-looking alternative track out (until we got stopped at a water hazard where the water level was going to be more than we can handle). Turning around we took another main looking track and fortunately came out on the road where we had come in. We had a shocking day with regard to bird watching, despite the fact the area is supposed to be good for birds; you simply have to find a good spot and stop for a while. With no car parks (apart from the picnic table which we discovered late and was in the sun) this is not so easy. (The end of the tracks near the dam would have been great but were a bit wet and soggy and there was a big risk of getting bogged). There were however many reptiles seen; most sunning themselves on the road. The one on this page played dead before I managed to move him on. If he had stayed frozen he was at risk of getting run over.



Paradise Dam



Paradise Dam



Too deep!







3<sup>rd</sup> April 2017. Never again will we do a Grade 5 Walk! The walk to the summit of The Bluff on Mount Walsh (the National Park that overlooks Biggenden) is divided into Grade 4 and Grade 5, but mostly it is Grade 5. There is a warning sign at the beginning of the walk highlighting the risks of injury and death and one further up the hill (a lot further up the hill)



At the top: what a view!





highlighting that only experienced bushwalkers should continue from here.

This walk is essentially UP, and then of course on the way back finally DOWN; most of it frustratingly over loose scrabbly rocks. The upside of this however is the spectacular vistas you get on the way up, each time you turn around you can see a bit more as you are a bit higher up (hopefully).

A walking stick is almost essential equipment to the only moderately fit (us) right up until you get to the bit where you have to use a rope to get up the rock. At this point I suggest you leave the stick off to the side of the track and pick it up on the way back. From the rope you are rock hopping (sliding, climbing, and occasionally holding on for dear life with your fingertips in the smallest of the cracks in the granite). The view from the top however is worth it.



Don't do this walk if you are:

- a) unfit
- b) not willing to challenge yourself
- c) don't have appropriate hiking gear
- d) have any injuries (I had two sore toes, one on each foot!)
- e) afraid of heights
- f) don't like taking risks.

4<sup>th</sup> April 2017. On 28<sup>th</sup> March between Gin Gin and Childers, on our way home from one of our drives we copped a stone chip- cracking the windscreen in two places. If we had been keeping the car we may have moved to repair the break but wanting to sell the car soon the decision to replace the windscreen was pretty obvious. I called NRMA to confirm I was covered with windscreen insurance. Yes, they would come to Biggenden but it was once per week and it was on Thursdays. They however wouldn't be coming this week – Cyclone Debbie's aftermath was due to hit us on Thursday and no one was prepared to drive out in that! So we didn't have to wait another week we negotiated to travel toward the repairer and organised the have the windscreen replaced in Childers. The painless experience lasted less than two hours (one of that was waiting around for the sealant to harden) before heading off to have lunch with Wayne from *Yachtdomain.com.au* at Bargara. The only hitch of the afternoon was the crack of a flying stone chip on the Bundaberg bypass road; fortunately there was no windscreen damage.



## Cania Gorge

5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> April 2017. The drive to Cania Gorge was relatively short in comparison to some of our trips and after a leisurely start at Biggenden, and lunch along the main street of Monto, we arrived at the Cania Gorge Tourist Park (the caravan park at the western edge of the gorge) mid afternoon. The park staff 'feed the birds' at 4pm but that was a bit of a disaster as whilst the rainbow lorikeets got a feed on the feeding frame, the galahs, who usually have the food off the tops of the picnic tables, were thwarted by uncontrolled, unsupervised and unappreciative small children. This we had to put up with, being school holidays, and we found that over the course of the next few days, more and more campers, all with screaming children, arrived to spoil the serenity.

6<sup>th</sup> April 2017. Our time spent in Cania Gorge was short and our excursion on this day only a drive of 11 kilometers each way. The Cania Gorge Road ends at Cania Dam, the wall built between 1977 to 1982. Just like Paradise Dam, Cania Dam was named after the gold mining settlement it drowned. Most of the old township buildings were demolished in the construction of the dam but some headstones from the cemetery were saved and constructed into a plaque near the dam wall. There is also a list of the others that were buried in the historic cemetery. The main activities on the dam are water sports and fishing.

On the downstream side of the dam wall there is a short walk (with interps) to Paddy's Gully (nicknamed 'The Shamrock' ) which for a while was the principal mining area of the Cania gold fields. The whole area wasn't very profitable though and the township of Cania and the goldfields around it collapsed in the 1920's (although individuals tried to rework remaining fields in the 1950's.)



Our campsite in Cania Gorge



Cania Dam

Most of the walks in Cania Gorge start from one or other of two main car parks along the Cania Gorge Road. There is a track from the caravan park to one of these and the walk to Big Foot is within a short walking distance from the caravan park property.



Big Foot



Cania Dam



## Cania Gorge cont...

7<sup>th</sup> April 2017. Of several options available to us we chose the 3.2 kilometer walk to the Dripping Rock and The Overhang for our morning stroll. The walk was pleasant enough but we let through a family group who were making far too much noise for any serious bird watching. After morning tea at The Overhang we headed back to camp, picked up lunch at



Monto and headed off for a drive, 20 or so kilometers north of the town. Our aim was the Hurdle Gully Lookout which overlooks the valley of Three Moon Creek (Cania Dam is on Three Moon Creek). There are picnic tables here overlooking a patch of significant bush below. The large interpretation boards are well done providing the background and history to the saving of this particular area of bush.



Hurdle Gully is a rare landscape, where water in flood backs up to replenish the local aquifers and fire rarely penetrates. It is an extreme form of dry seasonal subtropical rainforest (sounds like an oxymoron but we did come across this vegetation type on the foothills of Mount Walsh) and was classified as an Endangered Regional Ecosystem in 1999. The area protects 10 threatened animal species and 8 threatened plant species.



Hurdle Gully lookout



Beautiful Betsy

Just on the northern side of Monto is a Heritage Centre with historical buildings and an information centre. It was closed when we stopped there but in its yard is a one in five scale model of 'Beautiful Betsy,' a World War II Liberator B24D built in 1943 that went missing on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1945. She had flown 22 combat missions before being retired and was on her way to Eagle Farm in Brisbane. She was found almost fifty years later in 1994 at nearby Krombit Tops National Park. Krombit Tops National Park is only accessible by 4WD and was closed after all the rain the countryside had had from Ex Tropical Cyclone Debbie. The Queensland parks department has information on Betsy's location if you wish to visit her.

# Easter in the Isa

Whist we hadn't exactly planned where we were going to spend Easter, we didn't expect to be spending it compulsorily in Mount Isa. Whilst Mount Isa is the biggest town in the stretch from Emerald to Darwin a set of unfortunate circumstances had us sitting around waiting for a delivery. We had left Cania Gorge and headed across to Emerald for a few days for no particular reason other than that I wanted to pick the brains of the roads board with regard to my obligations of selling my Queensland registered vehicle in the Northern Territory. As we had arrived on Saturday this required us sitting around until Monday at least. There is not a lot to do around Emerald city, unless you like looking at street and local art or walking in the Botanic Gardens. The idea of a days' fossicking at nearby localities in the horrendous heat didn't appeal either and so essentially we just stayed in the air conditioning in the cool. Emerald to Longreach had us driving over the Great Dividing Range and into the Eyre Basin, noting the green countryside on the eastern end of this journey, and stopping for lunch at Alpha, where the cats were happy to get a walk (and nibble) on the lush grass in the main street, and we indulged in some of the best vanilla slices I've ever tasted. From Longreach (we thought) we had a choice. Because Longreach to Winton was only a couple of hundred kays but Longreach to Mount Isa was around 640 we decided we would head to Winton for lunch and then decide what our next move was. An alternative was to camp at one of the roadhouses between Winton and Mt Isa (a choice of two, one town having the pub that was used in the Crocodile Dundee movie) to break the trip into manageable bites for our aging felines. In the end however the decision was made for us.

There is quite a bit of roadwork between Longreach and Winton and having just got our windscreen replaced in Childers a mere 8 days before you can imagine our initial shock when we heard the characteristic ping of a flying stone from a road-train's tyres. A quick cursory look showed nothing and with a big sigh of relief we continued on. What we had missed however was the stone had hit in the very top right hand corner (underneath where the navigation unit was) and by the time we got to Winton, 50 or so kays later, there was a very obvious 15 cm crack angled diagonally across the windscreen. Assuming that my insurance would only pay out one replacement windscreen, I rang them anyway to see if they had a recommended supplier. 'Oh no,' I was told on the phone, you have unlimited windscreen replacements.' Wow! After discussion with the NRMA insurance advisor it was decided our better option for replacement was Mount Isa rather than Winton and I let her know we would be there the next day. Efficient as ever, very shortly later I got a phone call from the Mount Isa supplier to organize a time. They had a full afternoon the next day but could fit us in first thing in the morning. Informing the lady on the other end of the phone

that we were going to have a couple of days rest in The Isa anyway, and that we weren't expecting to arrive until the next day was of no use. 'That's great,' she said, 'but it is Easter and we will be closed until Tuesday next week' – ahh – that was 6 days away! So the decision was we would continue through to Isa today, another 430 kilometers away! By this time it was getting on to a late lunchtime and just after 1pm. We had all the makings for lunch except cold meats so we stepped into the SPAR supermarket to stock up. The idea was to put the cold meats in the caravan fridge until we found a suitable wayside stop for lunch – until I went to open the caravan door: the only thing holding it on was the single metal latch, the entire lock system having disintegrated and fallen off on the inside step (it is about 20 years old after all). Frustrated at not finding a hardware store for an emergency fix in Winton (the rural supply store didn't have any suitable materials) and no one listed on the internet as a caravan repair outfit we ended up holding the door closed with cloth tape (100 mile per hour tape) for the next 430km, checking its integrity every 100 or so kilometers and arriving at the caravan park after official office closing hours.



Of course there was no sleeping in after the long drive. The next morning we had to get to the windscreen replacement joint, and leave the car there until it was going to be fixed (none of this waiting around whilst it was being done like Childers). Saving our



dollars we walked into town rather than take a taxi, admired the new Landcruisers (maybe our next vehicle?) and headed to the dreaded MacDonald's for a coffee (the only place I can guarantee there is a likelihood of someone actually knowing what a cappuccino is). From here we made several phone calls to try and sort out our door latch. Of course because the latch was broken, every time we left the caravan over the subsequent days meant it wasn't locked and anybody could have just walked in. Fortunately, though, we had good neighbours so there was some modicum of security. Mount Isa, like Winton has no caravan repair places. The closest it comes is from a gentleman who lives in Camooweal – a mere 185 kilometers away! Camooweal is apparently technically a suburb of Mount Isa and the Camooweal Street (part of the Barkly Highway) is apparently the longest suburban street in the World. Whilst the contact was willing to come to the Isa it was decided that once the part was obtained that Andrew could probably fit it himself. So armed with new information for a supplier Andrew organised a new part and we were stuck waiting for it. Because of its small size the supply company (CAMEC) was originally going to send it Australia Post but after last December's debacle (see Aboard Sengo December 2016) we insisted they spend a bit more money and send it Toll Priority. The only reason we didn't get it the next day was because it was Good Friday. It arrived delivered to the caravan park mid morning on Tuesday. By Tuesday afternoon we had a good, new working lock and we headed out of the 'Copper Town' on Wednesday.

## Lake Moondarra

Having been to, and explored, Mt Isa in 2012 we didn't need to partake in any of the touristy opportunities on this visit. We hadn't however seen Lake Moondarra so we made this our only excursion during our enforced stay.

Lake Moondarra, opened in 1957, lies '2 miles 'below Mt Isa' on the Leichardt River and the recreation area supplies water to Mount Isa township and the Mount Isa mines. Some water sports are allowed on the dam, it is stocked for fish (no license needed) and it is a known bird watching spot. A later than expected start had us arriving at 11am, essentially the middle of the day and probably the worst time to see birds. Because of our timing we would have missed many species but we still clocked 23 different species in the short time we were there.

*'Red dusty escarpments and the contrast of white tree trunks and green shrubs and grasslands.'* There is something with that image I have always found inspiring and today at the lake was the first time I'd seen these colours in their appropriate glory for some time.

Bird list for the lake: Zebra finch, Sacred kingfisher, Glossy ibis, Marsh tern, Green pygmy goose, Hard head, Intermediate egret, Great egret, Willy wagtail, Brolga, Wedge tailed eagle, Whistling kite, Black kite, Hoary headed grebe, Jacana, pelican, Ongrai finch, Rainbow bee-eater, White plumed honeyeater, Grey fronted honeyeater, Darter, Pied cormorant, Mudlark, Raven, Peacock, Peaceful dove.





## Renner Springs

20<sup>th</sup> April 2017. It was a 0730 start from the Barkly Station Roadhouse—where we weren't the last out but close enough to it. The previous day had been a 450 kilometer trip from Mount Isa, crossing the border to a 130 km road speed limit (we only drive at a maximum 100 km per hour with the caravan anyway) and a big orange fluorescent sign warning of unfenced stock. We had spent the evening with fellow travelers in the Barkly Station Roadhouse bar who were lamenting that they had mistimed the season by about a month and were on their way home from Darwin instead of heading to it.

Whilst the Barkly Station Roadhouse bar's highlight is a suspended ancient motorbike, the main feature of the bar at Renner Springs is a boar with a unicorn's horn (I am not kidding (well, maybe not a unicorn)). We had chosen Renner Springs for its lagoon, noted for being a great bird watching spot, and the short walk to the springs. Unfortunately because of the 'successful' wet season the walk is currently blocked by swamp a matter of meters into it so we were relegated to enjoying the birdlife in the lagoon area adjacent the campground. The birds spotted were: Black kite, little corella, great egret, hoary headed grebe, black fronted plover, crested pigeon, white-breasted woodswallow, galah, black-winged stilt, pacific black duck, straw necked ibis, pied cormorant, grey shrike thrush, female pied honeyeater, red capped robin?, white plumed honeyeater, magpie, mudlark, willy wagtail, brown honeyeater, rufous throated honeyeater, white faced heron, and common sandpiper



The campground at Renner Springs is basic. There are only 15 powered sites; four of them drive through, the others are a bit confusing and there is really only one useful tree, but although we were the first on site we couldn't take advantage of the mid afternoon shade as our power cords weren't long enough!

The 20<sup>th</sup> April is our wedding anniversary and Andrew took me to dinner at the fanciest restaurant around (the only restaurant around is the Roadhouse). The mixed grill was not bad. The lamb chop was spot on – (and fresh - they had only been delivered at 6pm) and the only bottle of red was the 'Grey Nomad' label.

The label from this 2013 McLaren Vale Shiraz states:

*The Land Down Under has provided an ideal habitat for the recently discovered species of Homo Sapiens, the 'Grey Nomad'. First emerging in the sixties around beach areas, traveling and residing in strange shaped boxes on wheels, they have since evolved to favour larger and more luxurious contraptions. Rarely in cities the "Grey Nomad" migrates north during the winter, where they frequent isolated coastal regions, the Top End and are spotted in the Red Centre. Not all with grey fur, known to be very friendly, tranquil and inquisitive, they are extremely approachable if offered wine. Their offspring are often heard to mutter, "have you seen our parents" and "don't spend our inheritance". This social mammal likes to congregate around waterholes to interact with other Grey Nomads from different habitats.*



Road Trains (up to 53 meters and four trailers) are generally limited to 90 kilometers per hour. We travel comfortably at 100 kilometers per hour most of the time. Whilst we do expect to pass a road train should the opportunity present itself, we were a little stunned when we were passed by this car carrier (admittedly it wasn't a road train and had no trailers but it was a longish truck).





## Renner Springs to Mataranka

21<sup>st</sup> April 2017. We were actually trying for Katherine but the air-conditioning in the car was playing up and the cats were hot so we stopped about 100 kilometers short. We stayed at the Tudor Manor, where Andrew had stayed on his trip from Brisbane to Darwin. The property is owned by the Hiway Inn...a truck stop on the corner of the Carpentaria Hwy and the Stuart Hwy 170 kilometers to the south and was on the market last December but they have withdrawn it and decided to refurbish it instead. The bar/restaurant area has had a new paint (we had to have garden table service) and the management is contemplating what to do about organising the sites into easier access. Management is aware that the general toilet block needs an overhaul.

We rang Darwin to check on Sengo, and Katharine to see if we could get someone to look out our air conditioning. Of course the timing was awkward. When we did get onto an air-conditioning specialist (it took us a couple of phone calls as one was so busy it would be a week before they could see us) we were offered an inspection 'tomorrow morning' – around 0700 in Katherine. That would entail a very early morning start so we decided against it. We took the easier option and organised to get it seen to Monday morning. The potential issue there was that if it wasn't fixable immediately, Tuesday was a public holiday and we would have to wait extra days for parts.

The day's drive included sightings of brolgas and wedge tailed eagles. At the Tudor Manor there were peacocks, black kites, babblers and apostle birds. And both a flock of black cockatoos and three brolgas sailed overhead during sundowners.

## What the Frack!

Throughout South Australia, Victoria and now the Northern Territory there have been obvious concerns regarding the exploration of coal seam gas. Down South there were notices on just about every farm gate we passed. Here, in Katherine they have taken their protest to a lovely mural on the Victoria Highway. In NSW where there is a lot more of this industry already entrenched, farm gate notices were more interested in the accessibility of water for irrigation.



## Oh, it's nice to be loved.....

At our lunch stop at Camooweal on our trip from Mt Isa to the Barkly Roadhouse, we were joined by fellow travellers for a chat. They were heading the other way



Ciilla retreated early to the cage and was not feeling sociable to strangers

and soon to go north, off-road. Whilst just about everyone stops to talk to others on the road ('bit like yachties/boaties on the water), this cat-loving couple didn't stop to talk to us – they stopped to pet Cilla and Tiger, seeing that we had them on the lead at the picnic table. I am not sure to feel amused or snubbed. Cilla retired early and despite gentle coaxing by the visitors didn't want to come out of her cage. Tiger was more social and got several pets but was a bit keen to get to the safety of the caravan.

I assume he was a bit disappointed however, when we put him back in the car for the rest of the journey.



Tiger looking longingly at the open caravan door... we still had 260 km to go.



# Katherine

22<sup>nd</sup> April 2017. Mataranka to Katherine. It was a relatively easy pack-up (we had not unhitched Kinquaid) and a short morning drive and we made our way off to the recommended Manbulloo Homestead at Katherine. It is a little way out of town but at the moment a bit cheaper as well - the first of April is turnover season for high season prices. Prior to that we would have scraped in cheaper at the River View Tourist Top Park but only because of our Top Parks membership.

Manbulloo Homestead 'Caravan Park' is situated 12 kilometers west from Katherine on the Katherine River. After talking to the 'gardener' (one of the residents who keeps the grassed sites lovely and lush) we went for an afternoon stroll along the river. We were advised we might be a bit too early for the river stroll with regard to spotting birds but we did manage to see a couple of species. And one freshwater crocodile! A few days later we left our walk a little late and again only saw a couple of species. We had more luck with the evening stroll along the road although you will have to convince me that the dollar bird is not stuffed and stuck on the power line at the corner- he seems to be there all the time!



Katherine River: Banks below Manbulloo Homestead

## Manbulloo Homestead

The original Manbulloo Station (Manbulloo is an interpretation of Murnbulu, local Wardaman word for crested pigeon) was one of many stations leased by an English conglomerate known as The Australian Investment Agency limited (known as Vesty's). In 1917, the location was used as a holding station between the conglomerate's other properties to the west (under different station names) and the railway line which was soon to cross the Katherine River. During WWII Manbulloo Station was commandeered by the army (initially 989 acres which was then extended) and the complex eventually included an airfield, an abattoir and a hospital.

There were five aboriginal groups originally working on the Manbulloo Cattle Station; Wardaman, Jawoyn, Yangman, Dogaman and Mudburra. All groups were involved in various activities and had limited contact with white men until the army commandeered the property and all groups were required to work for the government.

In 1993 Vesty's sold Manbulloo and the property was split in three. This section holds the homestead and is run with a few cattle and a caravan park.

There is a detailed interps board with further information at the end of the reception driveway.





## Cutta Cutta Caves

27 kilometers south of Katherine lies 1499 hectares of protected limestone landscape; a landscape type rare in tropical Australia, and Cutta Cutta Caves is the only location where the public have access. The area is home to five species of bat, including the rare Ghost and Horseshoe Bats, and 170 species of birds. There is a woodland walk accessible from the car park (with really nice interps boards) but paying for a guided tour is the only way to really see the caves. Picnic tables are also available at this location

There is no real evidence the local Jawoyn people regularly used the caves (it is a one-way cave system that floods with no escape) and the caves were 'officially' discovered by a stockman in 1900 and named Smiths Cave. In 1979 the area was renamed Cutta Caves.



Inside Cutta Cutta Cave



Inside Cutta Cutta Cave



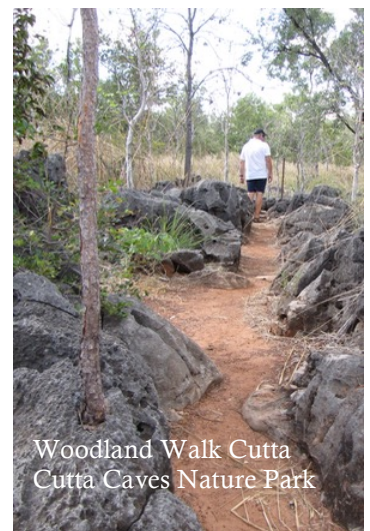
Woodland Walk Cutta Cutta Caves Nature Park



Broken weathered limestone



Woodland Walk Cutta Cutta Caves Nature Park



Woodland Walk Cutta Cutta Caves Nature Park

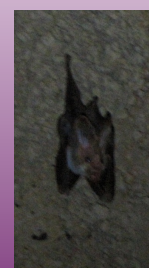


Inside Cutta Cutta Cave



Inside Cutta Cutta Cave

Because of the public access, the bat species have retreated further into the cave system than where the tour runs. We were very lucky to see this Ghost Bat.







Our little (single engine) Cessna 210 Centurian II



The crops outside Katherine

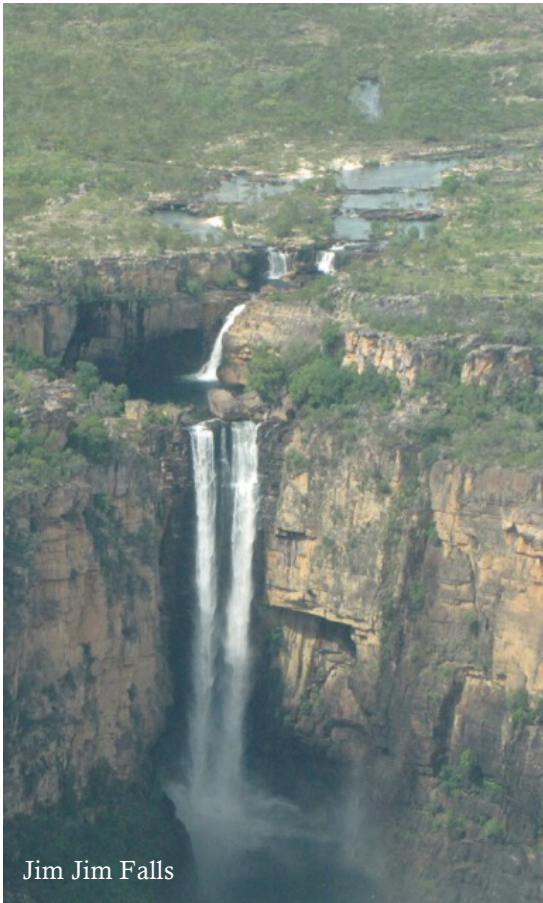
## By Air....

24<sup>th</sup> April 2017. Seventeen years ago, in July 2000, we arrived in Kakadu National Park in a borrowed Prado looking to explore this iconic national park. It was relatively early in the tourist season and the campgrounds were packed. I remember camping at Cooina (Yellow Waters) and doing the obligatory boat trip, getting completely mauled by mosquitos in the campground and avoiding crocodile traps along Maguk (Barramundi Falls) (all other tourists didn't know about this loaded trap – we'd gone bush bashing along the banks because of my (perhaps unfounded) paranoia about crocodiles (but perhaps not). We visited the other iconic places of Gunlom, Nourlangi Rock paintings, and Ubirr. One of the iconic places we didn't get to was the track leading to 'Twin' and 'Jim Jim' falls. Because of the time of season the track had only been opened by the rangers four days earlier (after getting the last salt water croc out). As a result 'every man and his dog' and all the tour vehicles had headed down the track. We decided that whilst we would have expected to share the experience with some tourists, sharing it with a city full was not going to give us much pleasure. In the end it turned out to be prudent. We found out later that a tour bus had got bogged and blocked the track for five or so hours.

Twin Falls is spring fed but the amount of flow is reliant on the rain from the wet season. Jim Jim Falls is only wet season rain reliant so it can dry up in The Dry. Buoyed by the fact we had made the right decision at the time I decided that one day we would come back in the wet season and fly over to see them at their best. Today was that day.







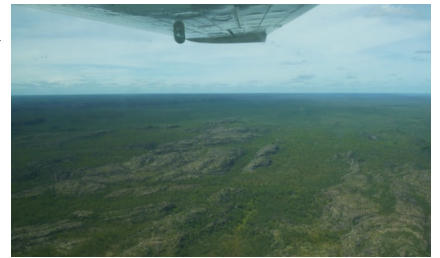
Jim Jim Falls



Twin Falls



Of course Jim Jim Falls and Twin Falls are in Kakadu and we are in Katherine and 30 kilometers from Nitmiluk. Helicopter pleasure flights around Katherine Gorge are relatively expensive for the time you get in the air and a plane ride gives you more bang for your buck (longer time) although the intimacy with the landscape might not be there. Don't get me wrong, I encourage everybody to take a helicopter ride at least once to see an area – in 2000 we took one from Jabiru over the area west of the East Alligator River, Ubirr and the Ranger Uranium Mine. The machine was akin to those used in the television series *Mash*, open-sided and has to be one of the most WOW experiences I have ever had – the pilot encouraged us to lean out with our feet on the skids if we wanted a different view. A few weeks later we were in a helicopter ride over 'The Bungalows' (Purnululu National Park) in Western Australia and whilst equally as visibly spectacular, there were three of us in the back, I was in the middle and the sides were glassed – there was no leaning out here. However today we were presented with an option





to take an extended a flight over Nitmiluk (including Katherine Gorge) and over some of Kakadu and Jim Jim and Twin Falls. Whilst we weren't in the middle of Wet Season we are at the end of a very wet one and the chance of seeing the falls in close to their glory was good.

Natmiluk and Kakadu share a border and the landscape is a mixture of floodplains, tessellated rock flows and interesting and spectacular escarpment. The countryside is still green, a direct result of one of the wettest wet seasons on record – apparently in a month all will be brown.

Of course in a plane you are taking photographs through the windows and the windows in our little 45-year-old plane were not the clearest (The couple of photos I took across the plane through Andrew's window seemed clearer – but that was the pilot's window so I guess it needs to be clearer).

The wind speed on the ground when we took off was probably around the 20-knot mark and there was a little bit more turbulence than we would have liked (I got the impression from the pilot when we said goodbye that he was a bit disappointed with this) and of course it took a little away from the experience. I do admit that toward the end I was getting a little air sick (which probably means I will get a bit sea sick when we get back aboard Sengo) and the landing was interesting; we came down in a 16-knot cross wind; first on one wheel and then on the other!

The plane was a 1972 Cessna Centurian. The pilot seats reminded me of tired and ripped vinyl seats out of a friend's first car and whist Andrew and my seats were separate, had there been other

passengers (only two small people would have fitted) they would have been forced to almost sit on each other in the bench seat in the back (at least the plane wasn't held together by tessa tape as one little plane we were on 15 years ago seemed to be).

The Katherine airport is actually one end of the RAAF Tindal Air Base. Photography of the airfield is technically forbidden and it is the RAAF air tower that directs when and where you can land, take off and which direction you can take for how long – a little bit restricting for joy flights. From the air you can see the farming land around town; you can't see this extent from the highway coming in.



## By water.....

25<sup>th</sup> April 2017. The original idea was to stick around Katherine for the Dawn Service as being an Air-force town the service should be significant. However, we found we didn't quite have the enthusiasm to get up early enough and the idea of driving 12 kilometers into town, finding a car park etc really didn't appeal in the end. We finally pulled ourselves out of bed, drove through town just before they closed the roads off for the parade and headed out to Nitmiluk National Park.

By the time we arrived it was 1000. As per the previous few days the weather forecast was for the mid thirties and it was already hot. I dislike walking in the heat. Our initial thoughts were to do the 4.8m Baruwei Loop, which is estimated to take two hours. That would bring us off the walk at around midday. Overhearing a guide stipulate there is little shade up on the escarpment and after Andrew discovered the graph which showed air temperatures on the escarpment are around 10 degrees hotter than the maximum average air temp elsewhere, we decided that perhaps we were leaving our run this morning a bit late. Even the idea of walking to the Southern Rock Pool and getting a ferry ride back wasn't appealing (that walk is 5 kilometers).

So we went 'tourist' instead. We'd missed the Three Gorge Boat Cruise (which leaves at 9am every morning) and so got on the Two Gorge Boat Cruise instead. It was a very pleasant exercise. The commentary is a mixture of local Jawoyn lore, geological and biological history. What I found interesting was the fact that the sandstone here is believed to be less likely to erode than the local volcanics.

The Katherine River down until Gorge 1 is wet season fed. It is only at 17 Mile Creek, approximately opposite the Visitors Centre that the river becomes spring fed with a permanent flow.



Katherine Gorge



Katherine Gorge



Katherine Gorge



Katherine Gorge





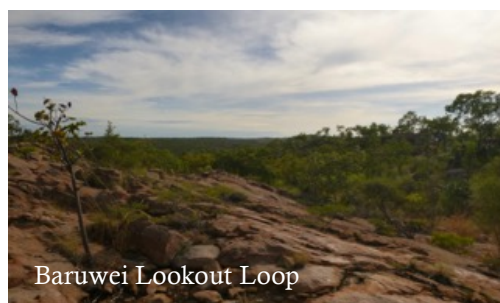
Baruwei Lookout



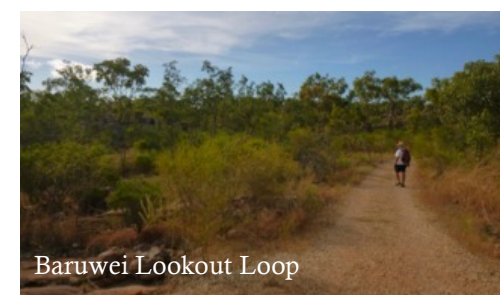
Baruwei Lookout

## By land....

26<sup>th</sup> April 2017. The Baruwei Lookout loop. Whist we started a little later than we wished we were walking on the track at 0800. Our original plan had been to do this track in an anti-clockwise direction as we had been told that the track was a more gentle 'up' in that direction as opposed to the steep steps up to the lookout near the Visitors Centre. In the end we followed the loop in a clockwise direction as I had woken up with a headache (not a great state when you are heading out for a hike in the heat) and I decided we would try for the lookout first and then see how I felt after that. Fortunately I felt okay and was still feeling okay at the end of the walk. We hadn't done a decent walk since Mount Walsh (excluding the short walks at Cania). There was more cloud cover today than yesterday and there was a stronger, cooler breeze. Perhaps we could have walked to the Southern Rockpool for a swim. Perhaps we will do that next time. When we completed the walk we retired to the balcony at the Visitors Centre for a refreshing drink (we were hoping for a bit of bird watching but only saw four species; blue faced honeyeaters and greater bowerbirds hunting for food from visitors, and a pied butcherbird and black kite in the trees above). Andrew did spot the tail of what was most likely a saltwater crocodile. During the boat tour we had been told that the last two 'salties' were caught about 3 weeks earlier but clearly they are expecting more captives. The crocodile trap is still set up just south of the Visitor Centre. As the river level drops a rock barrier below the Centre seems to stop the saltwater crocodiles later in the season. Freshwater crocodiles get trapped in the gorges but are left alone.



Baruwei Lookout Loop



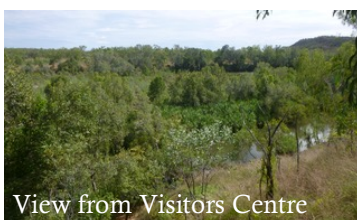
Baruwei Lookout Loop



Baruwei Lookout Loop



Baruwei Lookout Loop



View from Visitors Centre



Baruwei Lookout Loop

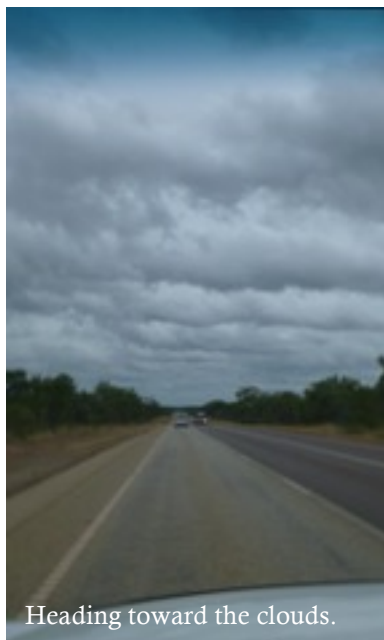


# Darwin

27<sup>th</sup> April 2017. We made a leisurely start leaving Manbulloo and heading out of Katherine at around 1100. Because we were towing there were no side trips and despite the prediction of some rain we headed straight for Darwin. The sky had been overcast when we woke and there was no fog on the ground across the paddocks this morning (as there had been the previous few days). The breeze was somewhat cooler than it had been as well and the further we headed north the more defined clouds and dark sky we saw. A tropical low had been threatening north of the TIWI Islands above Darwin and whilst its predicted path had changed from south to south west, there was still some concern that Darwin might receive some rain from this system. Indeed the previous couple of days had shown rain on the BOM.gov.au rain radar. Today however there was only a hint of rain when we arrived, a few droplets' coming down just as we settled the caravan into a powered site at Hidden Valley Tourist Park. The late afternoon was spent catching up with *Grand Cru* (another Leopard catamaran who had spent the past few months in Bayview Marina and were due to head off to the Kimberley in the next couple of days) before heading back to camp for a simple sandwich dinner.

For the 350 kilometer journey birdlife consisted mainly of black kites along the road, and the only wildlife was a dingo who ran across the road in front of us.

28<sup>th</sup> April 2017. It was always going to be a leisurely start but it became a bit later as we got involved



chatting to an adjacent camper who was due to leave this morning. Our first stop was to a caravan dealer to check out the state of the nation – apparently April and May are very slow months but this particular business is prepared to take the car and the caravan on consignment if we don't sell them before we go. Whilst we probably won't get as much money back on them this way, it will take the stress out of the process. After this we took a quick trip to Casuarina Shopping Centre for a much needed back massage and picked up some cat food at the Parap Vet. Our final exercise for the day was to head down to the Cullen Bay Marina to check out Sengo.

There was not a spec of mould inside the boat (and very little on the outside where I couldn't reach) and I will partially attribute this to someone recommending clove oil to me. The Marina Office smelt a bit mouldy and I was wondering what our boat was going to be like. Sengo seems to have come through the third wettest season on record (and almost the second by a matter of 18 mil) just dandy and now the process of the clean up begins. But not today

29<sup>th</sup> April 2017. Andrew had plans to start the clean up process by servicing the winches today. I had plans to do some quarantine investigating. Mine was internet based and so completed easily. The heat got to Andrew on the other hand and he managed to finish a novel instead. We do have a list of all the things we need to do and I would like to get them done as quickly as possible but the weather is likely to make havoc with our senses. There was no rain today.

30<sup>th</sup> April 2017. Finally! Today was the first day of physical work. Andrew got the two electric winches serviced and I started scrubbing the decks.

**Croc Count:** It has been a while since I added a croc count in a newsletter: Croc count for April: 2: one saltwater, one freshwater. Both in Katherine – nowhere near the sea!