

Adrian asked if I could summarise my trip last month to the outback, as some of you may be considering a similar tour, noting we are now so restricted in where we can go.

We went at very short notice to join another couple, inspired by:

- John Keniry's talk on the Darling River,
- reports that there was lots of water in the Darling and Menindee Lakes
- to spend some money in regions devastated by drought and lack of tourism due to Covid restrictions

In summary: It was outstanding, involving:

3,000 km in a normal car (Subaru Outback, others had a little Daihatsu).

All main roads were sealed except Menindee to Balranald, even Broken Hill to Tibooburra is now sealed.

600 km were on dirt roads, all well graded and wide with easy dry creek crossings, to get to some national parks, but keep an eye on weather as rain could mean being stationary for several days.

We went to:

6 national parks. all superb, all very different

3 historic mining towns, all very different...Cobar, White Cliffs, Broken Hill/Silverton

3 lakes with water, some without (including Lake Mungo, which has been dry for 16,000 years)

4 giant woolsheds

Some surprises:

Green pastures most of the way, until west of Nyngan, and from Hay Plains back to Sydney. There has been very little rain west of the Darling, and so landscape was mostly arid there, amid patches of wildflowers.

Much less water in the Darling than I had expected, but at least it was flowing. There was plenty of water in the Murrumbidgee.

Water was only in the northern lake at Menindee.

Apparently at the urging of the irrigators lobby, \$500 m was recently spent on a pipeline from the Murray to Broken Hill, to provide water in case Menindee Lakes run dry. All paid by you and me as taxpayers, but it seems nothing paid by the upstream irrigators who lobbied for it and benefit from traded water entitlements even at low water levels with massive impact on the lower Darling.

There were quite a lot of birds, but not the flocks I expected. Several pelicans....6 in one stretch of the Darling, so presumably there are fish.

Covid precautions were very good, with sign-in, distancing in restaurants, etc albeit I did not see a mask other than at the Flying Doctor Base (which is a must to see). However, you should wear a mask at the very interesting underground mine tour at White Cliffs as that space is confined. We saw no tourist buses.

There were many more people travelling than we expected, so accommodation can be tight. Some motels in Balranald and elsewhere relying on SA/NSW tourism were closed, perhaps broke.

Motels were always good and clean, typically no frills, cost average \$130. Underground Motel at White Cliffs was excellent at \$180, but note that there are no ensuites, so ask for a room near the toilets (or stay in the more basic hotel).

Food was very good and wholesome, with good wine available. Hotels are the usual, and sometimes only, places to eat. There are a few cafes, but almost no Asian restaurants, except Chinese was the cuisine in almost every RSL or Bowling club, not that we tried any.

Petrol was reasonable value, except White Cliffs and Wilcannia (where is a much cheaper unmanned pre-paid BP in side street beside river near the police station). Be aware that it can be 250 km between pumps

Wilcannia was 3rd largest inland port in the nation in mid 19th century, but population is now about 500. On the way, I was reading Dark Emu, which said one aboriginal town on lower Darling had about 1,000 population in pre-colonial days...now there is no town on the Darling west of Bourke anything like that number. Unlike what I had been told by others, Wilcannia was tidy and clean, with superbly restored historic buildings (incl hospital designed by Edmund Blackett, and Athenaeum Club once managed by the son of Charles Dickens) Several old shops are boarded up, and the pub only opens for 2 hours a day, but it seems the locals now take a lot of pride in the town, with several aborigine-led community groups taking responsibility, eg men's shed, dance groups etc We spent a fascinating hour with the principal and another teacher from the Wilcannia school, plus their husbands (one a science PhD) who were doing a bird count at Lake Peery, giving us insights into local issues, importance of country, etc

Broken Hill has so much to see, with glorious majestic 19th and early 20th century buildings. One of the best is the Trades Hall, where the extraordinary union history is well exhibited. The Miners memorial (Line of Lode), Pro Hart gallery, the Sculpture park, Silverton, Flying Doctor, Cemetery and the Palace Hotel of Priscilla fame are all must-sees. Allocate minimum of 2 full days there, preferably 3.

Mutawintji National Park was a special highlight, with a spectacular 2 hour walk along a gorge, and a circuit via the cliff if you are a sturdy walker

Mungo National Park with its Walls of China was also very interesting, but totally different landscape. Try to join a guided tour if you can.

Mt Grenfell NP (turn off 30 km west of Cobar) included a short walk to some superb rock art.

Yanga NP (5 km east of Balranald) has a massive shearing shed, able to keep 3,000 sheep dry undercover prior to shearing.

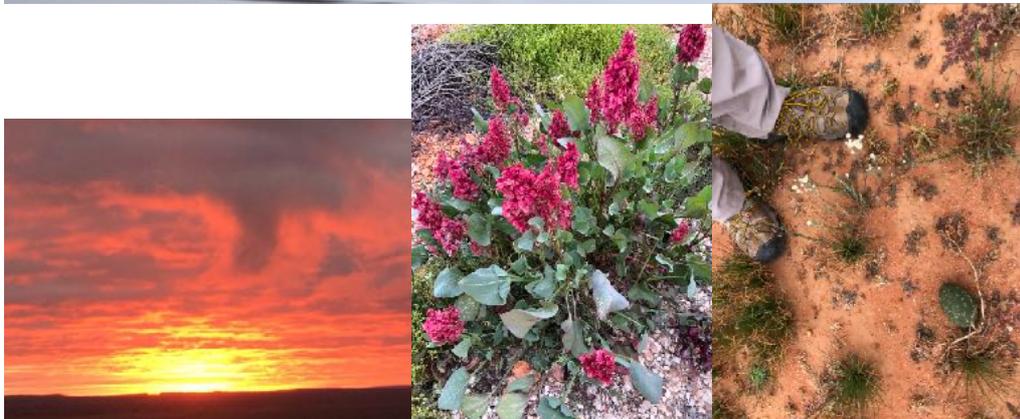
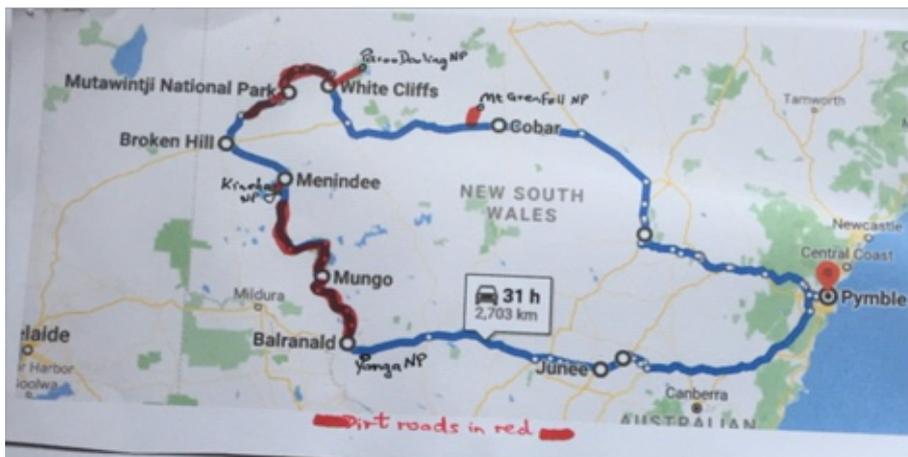
Junee was a highlight on the drive home, with splendid old buildings, including the liquorice and chocolate factory with an old flour mill.

Information signs were excellent on all significant buildings and walks.

Wi-Fi was in every motel except White Cliffs, Telstra had coverage in the main towns but not all back roads. I was off air during our days at White Cliffs.

Thoroughly recommend you go, so feel free to contact me if you need any more specific information. A few photos follow to give a feel for a few aspects

Peter James



wildflowers and bush tucker in seemingly dry remote areas between White Cliffs and Broken Hill

Darling was flowing but not deep (at Wilcannia and near Menindee). Pelicans at a weir on Darling at Kincheha National Park (part of Menindee Lakes region).



Murrumbidgee had plenty of water River gums demanded a hug

Wilcannia had superbly renovated buildings. Everywhere was Covid conscious

White Cliffs opal fields, incl the u/g mine, were fascinating. Overlooking Broken Hill, the memorial to killed miners was a beautiful respectful reminder of the dangerous past





Trades Hall, Flying Doctor, Sculpture Park (at sunset) are must-sees at Broken Hill



Mutawintji NP, Mungo NP, Mt Grenfell NP and associated history of aboriginal settlements are all awe-inspiring

Yanga NP has a massive shearing shed and exhibition. Pastures were green thanks to good rain this year after the prolonged devastating drought

Country pubs show thirsty locals over generations

