

Central Australia 2007

by Smokey

Dear reader,

this is a direct transcript of the diary I kept for this trip. It is more of a novel than a trip report, and is sometimes just notes for future reference, me talking to myself, or the telling of a story. I apologise for jumping around, but I wrote things as they occurred or as I thought of them. Some of my comments you may not agree with, but they are my opinions after all. Also some things may not be totally accurate, sorry but I'm not perfect. I am warning you now that this story contains moderate profane language, and is written the way I talk. Hope you enjoy.
Smokey

Explanation of Australian 'slang' words and terms used for the benefit of my Japanese friend Satoshi who came with us. You'd be surprised just how much 'slang' we Australians use.

Its best to come back and refer to them as you find them in the text as they are in chronological order. I got a bit slack towards the end of the story, and may have missed some, but you'll probably be able to guess what I'm talking about from the context of the sentence.

'to the gunnels' - means we had enough stuff with us to fill a boat to the top of its sides

'Southern Cross' - a kite shaped star constellation that is only visible in the Southern Hemisphere, points to true south, and appears on the Australian flag

'Road Train' - a very long truck found in outback Australia consisting of the Prime Mover and 3 or 4 trailers, remember you overtook 2 of them

'Roadhouse' - a service station for fuel, usually with a restaurant, toilets, sometimes showers

'crap' - another word for 'poo' or 'shit', pronounced K'so in Japanese

'10 minute noodles' - pasta noodles with mince meat and spaghetti sauce

'Salt lake' - a low lying dry area where rain water accumulates, with a thin layer of rock salt on the top and bottomless blue mud underneath. Do not drive on them or you will sink out of sight

'stiffed' - in the context its used, it sort of means you'll lose as well

'Blokes' - slang word for 'men', English say 'chaps', Americans 'guys'

'bugger' - can mean numerous things like 'shit' or in its first use here, probably 'nuisance'

'hit the road' - means started driving

'free camp' - to camp in the bush or a Rest Area as opposed to a caravan park

'roadkill' - an animal dead on the road that has been hit by a vehicle usually at night

'grey nomads' - a retired couple usually towing a caravan who avoid winter by following the sun

'woomera' - a tool made by and used by the Aboriginals to throw their spears further and faster

'cracked it' - 'became very angry' usually accompanied by a swear word

'brekky' - short for breakfast

'pub' - Australian word for Hotel, somewhere you can buy and drink alcohol

'knackered' 'stuffed' & 'shagged'- have several meanings, here they mean very exhausted

'pepped up' - found enthusiasm

'mozzies' - short for mosquitoes

'postie bike' - a small grossly underpowered motor cycle with skinny tyres that Postmen ride

'dingo' - native Australian wild dog, medium size light tan colour, can be vicious, they howl

'aired down' - a term used by four wheel drivers meaning reducing your tyre pressures

'bulldust' - a very fine red talcum powder like dust which gets into everything

'pissing off' - annoying

'self-registration' - is a procedure whereby you fill out a sensitized form placing the required amount of money in an envelope and placing it in the receptacle for the Ranger to collect later

'VB' - an Australian brand of beer Victoria Bitter which has a high alcohol content of 4.9%

'copper' - one of many words used to describe a police officer, originally came from the English term of Constable Of Police, COP

'shit ourselves' - means to panic

'sus things out' - find out what the situation is

'crocs' - short for crocodiles, the Saltwater or Estuarine kind will attack and kill humans

'grog' - alcoholic drink, usually means beer

'smokes' - cigarettes

'mustered' - to round up, inspect, count, organize cattle, all that sort of thing

'jargon' - language

'staked' - punctured by a stick

'drop dunnies' - a toilet perched over a large underground hole, a bit smelly at times

'arse' - posterior, bottom, bum

'buggered' - in this context it means unserviceable

'bloody hell' - an exclamation of surprise. Has nothing to do with red liquid or that hot place

'to beat the crap out of' & 'finished off' - in the context used means to kill

'mob' - means a family or group

'chucked' - or thrown

'drink' - used here it means the water

'bush tucker' - natural food found in the bush

'perishables' - fruit and veggies that don't last long even if refrigerated

'acro' - short for acrobalance, something we do at circus training

'Sev' - Laura's circus performing name

'stuffed' - means broken, usually beyond repair, similar to buggered

'suck' - wont be very good

'pick up' - be awarded

'water mirage' - an elusion that the road ahead is flooded by water, caused by the heat shimmer on the road surface

'coming to grips' - means getting used to something

'flagged you down' - indicated that they wanted you to stop

'turfed' - means threw

'on the fly' - whilst driving

'fire poi' - circus manipulation stuff that are swung around in the hands, with 'wicks' attached

'skippy stilts' - also known as kangaroo or jumping stilts, powerizers etc. They are built around long polycarbonate springs which allow me to jump, hop, skip and run really fast. Given the skill and confidence, which I don't have, you can do forward and backward somersaults over cars etc

'dives' - run down hovels

'Artesian Basin' - an extensive underground water supply spanning from South Australia to Queensland, full of minerals and often at boiling point temperature. Birdsville's electricity is generated from steam turbines driven from the boiling water. Most outback cattle properties

have bores sunk to provide drinking water for their stock. At Beresford Springs Rail Siding on the Oodnadatta Track, I had a bore water shower which was nice and warm but black in colour.

Mooroolbark - the suburb next to Kilsyth where we go to circus training

'bag of tricks' - my big green duffle bag full of circus equipment

'called it quits' - means to stop doing what you're doing

'pissed' - intoxicated

'giving us the shits' - being really annoying

'piss off' - means go away

'bucking bronco' - a rodeo horse

'german wheel' - a piece of circus apparatus invented by Chris Lashua (a young German guy), which he uses expertly in the DVD Quidam, one of my favourites. Basically its 2 large diameter tube circles joined together which the performer rolls around in doing tricks. Sev and another friend Micky want me to buy one for them

'eating a lot of dust' - driving in dusty conditions

'choc-o-block' - means full

'grotty and feral' - a bit dirty, unwashed body and clothes, hair all over the place, comfortable

'kicked off' - got started

'noodle' - means to sort through. It's a Coober Pedy word not one of mine. There's a public site in town where you can noodle for yourself

'like buggery' - means to run as fast as you can

'set you back' - means will cost you

'didn't want a bar of it' - not the least bit interested

'kicking back' - relaxing

'Milky Way' - part of the galaxy we're in

'looking a bit sad' - not as it should look, in this case, it was a tyre that was half flat (again)

'old timers' - elderly people

'trying to do a runner' - a term in the police force which means he was trying to escape or run away

'have a go' - ready to fight

'Saturday 22nd September 2007

A beautiful day in Melbourne, clear blue sky. Kevin Laura and Satoshi all packed (**to the gunnels**) by 8.30am. Carrying 90 litres of water, food for most of the 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ weeks, and 150 litres of diesel. S/R 320320. Intended route today is Ferntree Gully Road to Citylink, then Calder Highway all the way to Hattah-Kulkyne National Park (NP) 35km north of Ouyen. 11am 200km in 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours including 20 minute stop along the way. Now stopped at Rest Area with toilet and playground at Lockwood South (on bypass around Bendigo). 12.15 stopped at Marong Takeaway for lunch, 3 pies, 1 sandwich, 1 coffee \$14.70 Hit today's half way mark of 280km at 12.40, towing conditions are good, as the road is mostly flat and there's no wind. 2.15pm refueled at Sea Lake Mobil 53ltrs \$73 \$1.379ltr 7.7km/ltr not bad. Arrived Hattah-Kulkyne 3.45pm 540km in 7hrs 15mins. We've set up on the shore of Lake Hattah but warned against having contact with the water because of 'blue green' algae. The sky is a cloudless washed out blue with a $\frac{3}{4}$ moon in the east. Should be a squillion and one stars tonight. There are supposed to be toilets here but I don't see any except at the Visitor Centre 500 metres away (we did find one later). There's a sign that says 'no generators' but I can hear one. There's only a few people here, it's 'self registration' \$12.50 for 1 vehicle and up to 6 people for 1 night. My CDMA phone has 3 bars of signal, 6 bars using the 'in car' kit with big external aerial. There's a couple of flies about the a bit of Rid keeps at bay. Laura and Satoshi are juggling and swinging around Poi (a piece of circus manipulation equipment). As I will be doing all the driving, we've (I've) decided that Laura and Satoshi can alternate the cooking and dishes. Laura cooked tonight's Chilli Con Carne Burritos, they were very hot and we have 5 more packets. After tea we went sat back outside. The $\frac{3}{4}$ moon cast more light than the LCD fluro in the

camper, I could read my watch by the moon! As a result we couldn't see that many stars. The 'Southern Cross' was nearly upside down but still pointed south. With nothing to do, we all went to bed at 8 o'clock. Firewood is not permitted to be collected in the Park, but there's plenty outside. Took 1 photo.

Sunday 23rd September

Kevin awake at 6am, Laura soon after, Satoshi about 7.15. I don't think any of us got much sleep, that's normal first night in a strange bed. There's about 30% cloud this morning, so the sunrise was all pink. Packed up, breakfasted and on the road at 8.30. Not necessary to camp in National Park as there are plenty of tracks off to the right, Old Calder Road 10 kilometres north, other good track 14km north, very good track 19km north. Stopped at Red Cliffls to look at 'Big Lizzie', an olden days 'Road Train' that could go anywhere. Built 1915 by Frank Bottrill Prime Mover 10.36mtrs long x 3.35 wide x 5.49 high 45 tonnes turning circle 61mtrs 2 trailers 9mtrs long each carry 35 tonnes engine 44.74kw 60hp single cylinder crude oil burning bore 228mm stroke 450mm flywheel 2.13mtrs diameter weighed 3 tonnes speed 3.2 to .8km/h has 8 large flat cable anchored movable plates on each wheel allowing it to walk over anything, took 3 photos. 11.15am strong right to left cross wind. All vehicles must stop at Fruit Quarantine Station 7km west of South Australian border. Took bananas, tomatoes, apples and potatoes. Bugger. Had a look in the back of the truck and camper fridge, so don't lie, up to \$20,000 fine for 'undeclared' fruit. Naturally 100 metres past is a Roadhouse with a Supermarket selling fruit and veggies. The road to Morgan is bitumen but a bit lumpy. Took on 50ltrs diesel in Renmark as it was \$1.339ltr. Arrived Morgan 1.10pm 332km. Just looked at the map and discovered that we took the back road by-passing Barmera and Waikerie. 2.45pm arrived Hallett, not much there. Added 20ltrs diesel to tank. 3.50 arrived at Laura via Caltowie and 14km of good dirt road. Had to wait for a flock of sheep to be moved off the road. Quick stop at Laura, 1 pie and sauce, 3 ice-creams \$8. Arrived Melrose caravan park 4.30 8 hours to do 570km Powered site \$25 2 adults 1 child nice park, have stayed here before. Seemed like a long day with cross and head winds. Satoshi and Laura went for a long walk along the dry creek. A kangaroo popped out of the bush and scared **crap** out of Satoshi. Armed with his camera, he's gone back with Laura to hunt it. 1 photo After that we all did some juggling and showed off to the other campers on our stilts. I went over to the kangaroo wearing my 'kangaroo' jumping stilts, and did a bit of bouncing in front of it. It wasn't interested. Satoshi cooked **10 minute noodles** for tea, very good. Shopping list : fuel, CD player, CD to tape converter thingy, potatoes, tomatoes, marshmallows, fruit and thermos.

Monday 24th September

A bit of a sleep in today, 7.30. Going to be another beautiful day. On the road at 9. Arrived Port Augusta 9.45. 64km refueled at Shell 63ltrs @ \$1.40ltr bought our fruit and veg \$38. Couldn't find a CD player so we'll have to sing to each other. Forgot to mention the sudden change in the countryside from the Melrose area, lush green and beautiful, then after you come through Horrocks Pass its flat dry salty and ugly. Port Augusta is such a hole. Departed at 10.45 Satoshi now driving. Just saw an Emu with chicks crossing the road. Stopped and walked out onto a small 'salt lake'. Very squishy under the crunchy top layer of salt. 1 photo I'd forgotten how desolate the landscape is, not a tree in sight. 12.55 made it to the Woomera turn-off at Pimba. None of us were really interested in the displays so we didn't stay long, left at 1.30. 40km north west of Pimba is Lake Hart, great view, large elevated Rest Area, fences can be driven around to get down into the bush, may get a passing train Arrived Glendambo, forget when, looked at Bon Bon Rest Area along the way but didn't like it. 76km further on is the Ingomar Rest Area. Its up on high ground and has a magnificent view to the west. Using Les Hiddin's (Bush Tucker Man) method of measuring the suns height above the horizon with 15 minutes per finger, we took bets on how long before sunset. Arrived at 5.30 546km in 8 ½ hours. I haven't checked yet, but I don't expect great fuel economy as we've been butting into a headwind all day. Well its now 6.30 which is the sunset time I chose, and the sun is still 3 fingers above the horizon. Laura said 7, I think she'll get **stiffed** as well. Satoshi said 7.30. The loser by the largest amount, me, has to do

the dishes. Laura is in cooking hamburgers and veggies for tea. Just had 2 **blokes** pull in and ask "How far to Glendambo?" They were obviously short of petrol. I told them it was 160km and offered them my 5ltr can of unleaded I had for the generator, but they said no thanks. Well Laura won the bet, the sun completely set at 7.05. Shortly afterward a huge Scania truck and trailer pulled in. It was a motorhome. I've never seen anything like it before, it would have cost \$1 million or more. After the, as expected glorious sunset, we had fruit and cream for dessert, and watched half of a Circue du Soleil DVD called Quidam, my favourite powered by the generator. I think 1 lightglobe and the laptop is about all the generator can handle, its not a big one.

Tuesday 25th September

Bit of a slow start today. I woke at 7.15 to find the camper rocking from a strong northerly wind and about 70% cloud. It'll be a **bugger** pushing into the headwind all day. We have a 100km to get to Coober Pedy, and 600km to the turn-off out to Uluru, at Eraldunda. It also appears the camper is not working on either gas or electricity. It also appears that all those AA batteries I bought from Bargain Haven were cheap because they're all flat. **Hit the road** at 8. Ingomar to Coober Pedy 93km. Stopped at abandoned opal mine, got out and had a look down the hole. This area is covered in them, a mound of dirt next to a metre diameter drilled hole that was deep enough that we couldn't see the bottom. (More on this later) Satoshi took some photos. Mobile phone service starts and finishes about 25km north and south of Coober Pedy. Fuelled up at the Mobil \$1.459ltr 31ltrs in tank 37 in Jerry Cans Have decided not to stay and look around. Departed 10.15 Pootpoura Rest Area 77km north, looks good, also 3 channel crossings within 20km look good to **'free camp'** by disappearing into the bush. Un-named Rest Area 114km north also looks good, well off the road, and possible to drive further back into the bush. Arrived Cadney Homestead Roadhouse 12 noon 157km north of Coober Pedy Bought 3 cassette tapes, 3 chicken snitzel burgers (huge, worth the money), mug of coffee (free refills), sprite and coke \$64. Saw our first Wedge Tailed Eagle feasting on **'roadkill'**. Since Port Augusta we've also seen many 'road trains', some pulling 3 full sized trailers or 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ length tankers of fuel. Anyway they're all at least twice as long as anything we have at home. I also pointed out all the **'grey nomads'** to Satoshi with their 4 wheel drives and gleaming white caravans. 100's of them. Satoshi says only the rich can afford them in Japan, and of course the space 'at home' to park them. We have an older brick veneer house on an acre in an outer east suburb of Melbourne. Satoshi told me a place like ours in Japan would cost the equivalent of about \$4 million, just a room to sleep in is \$1000 a month. Decided to 'top up' the fuel tank as the head wind and air conditioner seem to be chewing up the fuel. Took 25ltrs \$44 to do 157km that's 6.3km/ltr Left Cadney at 12.55 Satoshi driving, Marla 1.45. There's some funny looking clouds about with what looks like rain falling from them, but its too hot for it to reach the ground. 2.25 crossed rail line, 100km to Northern Territory border. Just saw one of those stupid looking 'solar' cars from some university or another. Looked like a flat yellow space ship covered in solar panels on 4 skinny wheels. Cloud cover is getting thicker. 3.00 Marrayat Rest Area and creek 40km south of border looks real good to camp, has Emergency phone as do some of the others. 3.25 crossed NT border S/R 322483 4.30 arrived Eraldunda 600km in 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours 58ltrs diesel \$96 \$1.658ltr, crappy fuel economy as expected 5.9km/ltr or 16mpg shit!! Desert Oaks caravan park \$36 powered 2A1C The receptionist said it was 36deg (40+ at the border) and that it hadn't rained for 8 months. Its now 7 o'clock South Australian time which is half an hour behind Victoria. Temperature still above 30 with a stiff westerly wind blowing. Typical, its been blowing from the north for the last 2 days with us pushing into it, and now that we want to go west, it blows from the west. The sky is now 100% dark grey clouds, but the receptionist said it wont rain, they always get this, and that it wont cool down until about 3am. Had a nice cooling swim in the pool, then I cooked hamburgers and salad for tea. We'll have canned fruit for dessert but no cream as its buried in the back of the truck. Some good news, I've managed to get the fridge going on gas so I hope it cools down or we'll have to chuck out some meat, which fortunately is still frozen from home 4 days ago. There must be a mobile phone tower around here as I have 100% signal.

The wind has risen and is blowing sand storms across the caravan park. The clouds are being blown away and the moon is full tonight. Its 9 o'clock and still about 30 degrees. Time for bed.

Wednesday 26th September

It actually rained a little last night for about 2 minutes. We didn't get blown away, but the wind has gone around further to be a southerly. Why couldn't it have happened yesterday? The clouds have all gone and I'm told it will only be 27 degrees today. Today will only be Eridunda to Yulara, 242km according to the book. Hit the road at 8.30 Satoshi driving, Laura in the front seat. I've seen signs restricting speed to 130km/h where it used to be unlimited. Also noticed the camper fridge did nothing running on gas all night. The red sand dunes, desert oak trees and spinifex is very beautiful and reminds me of the Simpson Desert. 47km truck parking bay on high ground, no trees or nothing. 55km Mt Ebenezer Homestead Roadhouse offers free overnight camping. 104km good Rest Area where you can get well back off the road, good shade and watertank. 108km turn off to Kings Canyon 117km track on north side to bush 125km first glimpse of Mt Conner, Satoshi went "Oooo?" I said, "No." 138km good Rest Area 144km Rest Area with toilets and table with seats, excellent photo view of Mt Connor, not good for camping though. 1 photo A Contiki bus full of overseas tourists had also stopped; (a) they were all lined up for the toilets (b) were taking heaps of photos & (c) looked tired all yawning 154km turn off south to Mulga Park Homestead, Gunbarrel Highway and Stuart Highway 235km 165km Curtin Springs Roadhouse The countryside is very beautiful just like the Simpson Desert, love it. 209km track south into dunes 221km first glimpse of Ayers Rock 224km Rest Area with track heading south into dunes, could be good 236km track south into dunes 254km (not 242km as book says) 11.30am arrived Yulara. (2517km home to Yulara, that's about equal to the combined main two Japanese home islands north to south.) A whole busload of people in a 45 seat bus were in Reception ahead of me, all paying separately, shit! Finally its my turn - 2 nights powered site 2A1C \$85 and you don't get any shade for that. We timed ourselves setting up the camper, Laura and I and Satoshi cranked it up, 20 minutes complete. I don't remember but Ayers Rock must extend to beneath the camp ground as it was almost impossible to drive pegs in. After setting up we went and had a look at the Cultural Centre. The entry fee into the National Park is \$25 per adult for 3 days, children under 16 free. I don't think the woman at the entrance believed me when I told her Laura was only 15 (which she is), but then again, "Quite frankly my dear, I don't give a damn!" Satoshi declined to buy any souvenirs when we saw the prices:- \$2500 for a simple painting, \$625 for a small carved lizard, \$105 for a spear which wasn't even straight, \$250 for a **woomera**. We drove around the base getting out to look at things and taking lots of photos. The flies were annoying, Laura **cracked it** at one stage, but it was directed more at me than the flies. As it was still hot, 27deg, we decided to drive out to The Olgas and have a look. We opted for the Walpa Gorge walk taking more photos. It was then back to the camp ground, cheese kransky's and salad for tea. I think the fridge might be working. After sunset, about 10 tour coaches and 50 other vehicles returned from sunset viewing. Over half the vehicles here are hired 'campervans', none of them small like the Combie we had in Europe. The place actually filled up to almost 100%. Its now 8 o'clock and Satoshi has gone to bed. It's a bit cool so I've put on long pants and windcheater. When we were here in 2000 it was pouring rain from a cyclone which had come in over Broome. The Rock was quite spectacular with all its waterfalls. The moon is full, no clouds and some stars visible. Its quite noisy here with all the people. Laura is trying to do some of her homework on the laptop. I think I'll go to bed soon too.

Thursday 27th September

None of us wanted to get up this morning. After **brekky** we departed for the climb up of Ayers Rock. Start Time 8.40. Satoshi very quickly realized how steep it was. We made it to 'chicken rock', about 20 steps, and had to rest already puffing like steam trains. I'm not sure how far it is to the top of the chain, maybe 500-600 metres, but it took us 1 hour 10 minutes to get that far, and we weren't overtaken by anyone older than about 20. Each crest Satoshi would ask, "Ask?" We'd say "No." (when we could breathe) The up and down across the top, about 500 metres, is still tiring. We finally arrived at the stone cairn 1 hour and 50 minutes (20 minutes more than when I was under 40) People coming down kept

telling us "There's a **pub** at the top." Wouldn't that be wonderful? If it wasn't an aboriginal sacred site there probably would be one. Commercialism. They could charge whatever they liked and helicopter it in. The last time we were up here, the small water holes on top of the rock had small bugs swimming around in them. They looked a lot like those prehistoric 'trylobite' things with a half moon head, tapered body and lots of legs. How they got up there I've no idea, I didn't see any this trip as the holes were dry. Anyway, after a few more photos and a look around, we headed back down. The views along the way are magnificent, but I think this will have been my last time. Refuelled at Yulara Mobil 440km 56ltrs \$96 \$1.709ltr Back to the camper for lunch and nurse sore feet. Forgot to mention there's 100% mobile phone coverage out here and on top of the rock. Rang Sheryl and texted circus friends from the top. One friend Wayne Green replied that the climb might be better exercise than circus training, but not better than sex. I wonder if it will ever disappear ending up in millions of homes worldwide? Certainly the well traversed areas are totally clear of small souvenir sized pieces of rock. Let's see; 1000 people a day, 30,000 a month for say 9 months of the year. Annually that's 270,000 tourists (and I bet its more than that) half of whom souvenir a piece of rock weighing say 20 grams, that equates to about 5,400 tonnes a year. I'm told that Ayers Rock is like an iceberg though, the bit above ground is only about 1/10 its total size. Then there's that other rock, Australia's second biggest (Turtle Rock???, which apparently isn't all that much smaller than Ayers Rock) somewhere around Wudinna, west of Port Augusta, in South Australia. Satoshi has gone to sleep, **knackered**, I'm sitting in what shade I can find writing this, and Laura has decided to watch a DVD 'Support your local sheriff', which is a very funny western. I had toyed with the idea of packing up and driving the 300km to Kings Canyon, even though I've already paid for the night here, something to remember for next time. Somehow it just didn't happen, we were all too **stuffed** from the climb. My feet hurt and Laura said her calves hurt. Satoshi didn't say anything as he still asleep. After a while though we **pepped up**, strapped up, and went for a stilt walk to the camp kiosk for icecreams. As expected we attracted a lot of attention. It was very hot but only 28deg. Kransky's and salad followed by tinned fruit and UHT cream for tea. Hot showers and into bed at 8.15. Unlike last night it has not cooled down. There's no **mozzies** but lots of moths.

Friday 28th September

A very slow start today, we didn't get away until 8.50. More blue sky and no wind. Sat on what the speedo said was 105km/h, actually only about 98km/h. 10.20am stopped at left turn-off to Kings Canyon after 143km in 1 ½ hours. Quick check around the rig, everything OK, Satoshi now driving and just turned Air Conditioner on. Sign says 165km to Kings Canyon Resort. Good thick scrub both sides of the road with no fences. Numerous tracks near 1st sand dune about 18km north of turn-off. More good places to free camp about 20km then the scrub thins out. 174km from Yulara would be good to camp on left near rocky bluff before all the wiggly bit if road, then it thins out again as it gets flatter. 195km 11am good Rest Area on the right with table and seats, shade and water tank. I really like the countryside with its numerous sand dunes, spinifex and the desert oaks are plentiful but spaced apart, tall and bushy providing good shade. A good spot to free camp. 220km 11.20am At about 250km you start to see the plateau on the right which Kings Canyon is part of at the western end. You can see where future deep gorges have begun to be eroded by the rainwater over the past millions of years. 267km there's a track off to the right that heads towards 2 spectacular looking gorges. 273km Kings Creek Station; camping, helicopter, quad bikes, Harley's, camels and fuel. 282km National Park Information Bay. Heaps of paddy melons growing by the roadside. Don't eat them, they're poisonous unless you're a camel. Just saw a person riding a grossly overloaded **postie bike**. We've also seen lots of people riding pushbikes 'touring around'. 314km 12.15pm Kings Canyon Resort. What a bloody rip-off, \$50 for 1 night on site 59 which would be amongst the most crapiest there is. All gravel, no grass, no shade. We don't know what the temperature is, but with all the rock around here, that would be elevating it. We'll have some lunch and relax a bit. I'll finish the clothes washing in the camper drawbar

bucket (a 20ltr plastic bucket with lid and drain tap that you can buy cheap from hydroponics shops. Put your clothes, water and detergent in in the morning, and they slosh around all day whilst you're driving. Saves on washing machine costs) There's a swimming pool here and I don't think it will be long before we're in it. There is no mobile phone coverage here (either CDMA or digital) That actually surprises me as all the overseas tourists come here as well. Went for a lovely swim in the pool that lasted about 1 ½ hours until we turned into prunes. About 3 we headed off to do the Kings Creek walk. 1 hour return, flat, but you have to watch every step. Lots of shade as you follow the creek itself. Took lots of photos. Had a look at the start of the canyon rim walk, 5.5km about 4 hours. The first bit is the hardest, an uphill slog of about 400 metres. I did it last time with Luke and remember being completely **shagged** at the end. Personally I'm not looking forward to it, but I cant let the others do it alone. Signs around the camp ground warn of not feeding the **dingos**, and as we are only 10 metres from the scrub I expect to see some tonight. Apparently a group of them were around last night howling about 1.30am, both Satoshi and Laura heard them but I didn't. Just **'aired down'** the truck tyres- 30psi rear 25psi front according to the cheap crappy gauge I've got. Cant find my good of course. I've done this in anticipation of corrugations, rocks, sand and **bulldust** on the Merrinee Loop Road around to Hermensburg. A travel permit is required - aboriginal land - cost \$2.50 from either the Resort reception office or Mobil servo. For once something is not a rip-off. Something that is still a rip-off are the helicopter flights. In 2000 Luke, Laura, Nick and I did one from Kings Canyon. We flew over the canyon, did 3 circuits of it, out over Carmichael Crag and back to the pad which was next to the camp ground. \$80 a seat for about 20 minutes. These days you can take an 8 minute flight for \$70 a seat, something similar to what we did for \$115, or the same as we did for \$220 a seat. I was going to offer going 50/50 for Satoshi to go, but I just didn't think it was worth it. Satoshi cooked 10 minute noodles for tea, absolutely delicious, his mum and girlfriend will be so happy we taught him to cook. If we ever come back here, must book site 63 well in advance as it has an uninterrupted view of the western MacDonnells, a table and seats, some grass and most importantly, tall trees on both sides for shade. It's the site we had in 2000. Satoshi has just returned from the shop with more bottled water (for tomorrow), I think I scared him as Laura and I will be carrying about 5 litres of drinking water for us. Another funny thing, I just heard a kid singing, "Star light star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight." You know what, it works 'cause I did it the other night wishing that the bloody camper fridge would work. And guess what, it does! Laura just stated she wants a 'triple trapeze' now! So we went to the playground but there was nothing suitable to hang by her ankles from. Back to the camper for more fruit and cream, both cold from the fridge. Satoshi is off a little way looking at the stars (something you don't see a hell of a lot of in Yokohama where he lives), and Laura is doing the dishes. I ventured out just before sunset and took a series of photos. I'd like to display this trips photos on a wall. I said today that you take great photos and stick them in a book and nobody looks at them.

Saturday 29th September

For once we got up early, 7am. A quick brekky and real quick pack up saw us leave at 7.45. Loaded up with lots of drinking water, we headed up the first ridge of the canyon rim walk at 8.15, before it got too hot. There was a nice easterly breeze blowing to keep us cool. As with Ayers Rock I thought this would be the last time I do this particular walk. Having now done it a second time, I again feel how I felt about it in 2000. The Kings Canyon Rim Walk shits all over Ayers Rock. Admittedly the first bit is a bit difficult, a climb of several hundred metres up the natural and man-made rock steps. There's even some seats halfway up. With only 4 rest breaks we made it easily in 15 minutes. Once on top the going is fairly easy and most enjoyable. Every step of the way there's something else to take a photo of. This time I took a heap of photos. I just love the blue sky, red rock, ghost gums and spinifex etc. It has really got into my blood. Along a bit further the sandstone has been weathered into beehive shapes, similar to that found in the Bungle Bungles National Park in the Kimberleys of Western Australia, and the Caranbirini Conservation Reserve in Queensland about 40km south of Borroloola. There's also some

really hairy lookout points along the tops of the cliffs, all with warning signs. About halfway, you descend via wooden steps into the Garden of Eden, and as the name depicts, its just that. A really nice cool shady place to sit, relax and eat morning tea. This part of the canyon is deep and narrow with prolific flora and deep cold permanent water. Take a towel for a swim if you like. More steps lead you back up top for the second half of the walk. Along here are the tops of the sheer cliffs seen from the creek walk. With my fear of heights, I crawled on my stomach to near the edge, but could not bring myself to look over it. I did hold the camera out over the edge (with the wrist strap on), and took numerous photos. It'll be interesting to see how they turn out with my shaking hands. The track then leads away from Kings Canyon, and crosses over to the next unnamed canyon, being the home of the Kestrel Falls, named after the local birds of prey. Unfortunately there were none soaring on the hot thermals, but evidence of their past presence was there in the form of white poo streaks where they nest on the opposite cliff face. From there its only about a kilometer back to the car park. Although our feet were a bit sore, we all commented that it wasn't as hard as expected. I would put this place on my personal list of places to revisit, well ahead of Ayers Rock. A quick stop at the Mobil servo to check tyre pressures. Short and sweet it was a total of 222km from the Mobil to the turn off into Palm Valley. 187km is gravel, about 130km of it was very badly corrugated, the worst I've ever experienced. Often just over a rise we encountered large pot holes full of bulldust that just couldn't be avoided. It was funny to see 2 hand painted signs (on old car bonnets), the first said, "Lift'em right foot." The second "Put'em right foot down again." It is a good idea to heed these signs as the road is very narrow and winding at this point. High range four wheel drive is the go, and get up to a speed whereby you skim across the tops of the corrugations. I found 60-80km/h was OK, these corrugations were about 300mm apart and 100mm deep. At speed you are airborne 2/3 of the time as your tyres skip across the top. Its quite safe if you don't make any sudden steering changes, and you keep it pointed straight ahead. At any speed lower than about 40km/h you feel each and every corrugation, which shakes the absolute shit out of everything. It's a good idea to stop about every 10km or so and check on things. One of the campers shock absorber mountings was torn clean out of the chassis leaving a big jagged hole, and the other one spewed its guts out loosing all the damping oil in the process. I'll rip both off and throw them away. From the turn off into the Finke Gorge National Park to the main campground is 17km and took about 45 minutes. Its pretty rough and four wheel drive is recommended but we didn't need to use it. Where the track crosses the Finke River (several times), they've put rock and gravel. There are 2 places to camp that have facilities; Boggy Hole which requires lots of four wheel driving through deep soft sand (we saw 3 vehicles bogged to the floor boards within metres of the track), and the main campground. Here there are showers, toilets, free gas BBQ's and lots of big shady trees. Where we're set up I'm looking at a beautiful natural desert garden which I'll take a series of photos of and have blown up. Found a willing young girl by the name of Brianna to have a go at stiling. She wasn't my fastest ever student, but after a while she was off unstoppable just like young Daniel. When I went to cook tea on the brand new BBQ's, I found they weren't yet connected. Brianna's dad came to the rescue offering the use of his own gas BBQ. You see, sometimes being a good Samaritan does pay off. Before tea however, we drove the 4km into Palm Valley itself (day use area only), to see the relic rainforest palm trees and cycads. Extremely beautiful but more on them later. I let Laura four wheel drive us there, and this time she didn't hit any trees. Took lots more photos before heading back to camp. The track is very rough and rocky with patches of deep soft sand. Of course we had no difficulty negotiating any of this as our truck is the best!, and my own driving skills are unparalleled (hang on a minute, I forgot Laura drove there. Well bang goes that theory of my expertise). On the way back Laura initially sat on the bulbar until her bum got too sore, then she stood up on the front seats and out of the sun roof. Satoshi also tried this but settled on sitting on his window sill hanging onto the roof. (For those of you that may be thinking this sounds dangerous and irresponsible, you have to remember we were going at less than walking speed, one rock at a time.) They both enjoyed this immensely, as it was like riding on the roof rack across the Simpson Desert, the best way to appreciate the countryside. After tea at 7.30, Ranger Megan gave a

'round the campfire' talk on the Park and its unique flora. The area was proclaimed a National Park in 1968 after the discovery of the palms and cycads. It was and still is called the Finke Gorge National Park despite the fact that Finke Gorge is not even in the Park, but further northeast near Glenhelen. Of course like all of the Northern Territory National Parks it is leased from the cattle station owners who own the land. Even though the Park is itself many thousands of square kilometres, it is only a very small piece of the cattle property it sits on (and the owners are more than happy to allow the Government to look after it). To keep the cows, horses and camels out and to stop them from trampling all over the delicate flora, electric fences surround the Park. There is also an electrified cattle grid that you drive over on the way in. Took some photos of it of course. Very clever. Camels still do trample the fences as they are so big and dumb they don't feel the electric current. To the palms. According to Megan, about 50 million years ago Australia was all rainforest, until about 45 million years ago when it broke away from what is now Antarctica and Africa, crashed into Asia, which pushed up huge mountain ranges to the north which effectively stopped the equatorial monsoonal weather from coming south. Australia dried up to become the driest continent on earth. The palms required 3 things to survive, a permanent water source, a place where the river current wont rip them out of the ground (as they only have a shallow root system), and some humidity. These palms in particular exist no where else in Australia. They are called Central Australian Red Cabbage Palms as their foliage is red in colour up to a height of about 3 metres and their core apparently tastes like cabbage. Even though there is no surface water evident, there is plenty underground which is common in many areas of Central Australia (to find it, you look for low lying areas with dense vegetation, run off areas from rocky ground, the inside corners of dry river beds, where there is evidence of kangaroo scratchings in the sand as they can smell it, and the presence of seed eating birds like finches and budgerigars, who require water daily and who do not venture further than a couple of kilometres from their source. These are only a couple of ways). Under Palm Valley exists a syncline of rock structure, a large wide V shape of impregnable granite with porous sandstone above. Sandstone absorbs water and stores it, so under the palms is their first requirement, permanent water. It takes about 300,000 years for the rain to reach the roots of the palms through this system. Palm Valley is not actually part of the Finke River, which can rise and flood very rapidly (we saw this in 2000 where flood debris was 5 metres above the bridge over the Stuart Highway), Palm Valley is an offshoot and just fills up very sedately like a lake with no current, the palms second requirement. Palm Valley is surrounded by tall sandstone cliffs which shelter the palms from the hot drying winds and creates the humid environment required. As you can see, it was a very informative talk. Over the last couple of days the moon has been rising later and later, so last night the sky was full of stars, not yet at its best though. I saw one of the many satellites orbiting the earth. Satoshi and Laura went to bed about 8.30, I lasted until about 9.30 trying to record all this before I forgot it. We were all well and truly shagged, it had been a big day, a great day. I ended up finishing this the next morning. PS I've discovered a way I can use my generator without **pissing off** the neighbours, run it in the truck with the sunroof open.

Sunday 30th September

An 'on purpose' very slow start today. Everyone had a good sleep in, a slow pack up and shower followed. **Self-registration** was only \$16.50 and well worth it. Put this place on your list to definitely come to. Left the camp ground at 10.30!! 17 slow kilometres back to the main road, then good bitumen all the way into Alice Springs. Total 154km arrived 1pm. As much as I try not to be racially prejudice against the aboriginals, its hard not to when there's evidence everywhere of the vicious circle of alcoholism, vandalism, unemployment and boredom they suffer through each day. I truly wish there was a way their lives could be changed to something us white bastards could admire and respect. All this talk of 'looking after the land' is such a load of crap when you see the mess they leave behind on the sides of the road and in nicely shaded creek beds. The perfect example of this is the road we traveled this morning. For most of 100km or more there's a constant trail of empty **VB cans and cartons**. I pointed this out to Laura so she could try to understand both my prejudice and pity. Anyway, the ones who come to public

and police notice are the minority. Each time I see something negative, I make myself remember the 3 aboriginal guys we met whilst camped on the Robinson River halfway around the Gulf of Carpentaria. We'd set up when we heard this rattley old four wheel drive come down the track and cross the river. As they went past us they gave us a big stare, which I interpreted as unfriendly being the paranoid copper I was at the time. Sheryl and I discussed packing up and leaving we were so concerned. To make matters worse, about half an hour later they came back, stopped and all got out. We were really start to shit ourselves now. I told Sheryl I'd go talk to them first and sus things out. They're in the river washing, obviously not worried about crocs as we were, using soap which I didn't like (it kills the fish). As I approached they were all smiles. They were the fittest, healthiest and friendliest bunch of guys I'd met. They were polite, there was no grog or smokes evident, and they just wanted a bath. They told me they'd been out all day mustering their cattle, we were on their land which stretched for many kilometres in every direction, and that they were hot, sweaty and dusty. I nervously asked if it was alright to be camped there, (and pardon the jargon but that's how it was), "Thas alright mate, everbody camp dere." They also went on to say, "You need help, homestead's up the top of hill." What a relief, we slept soundly that night. Anyway I digress, back to today. We set up at the Big 4 Caravan Park just south of Heavitree Gap. Everything perfect as one would expect in a Big 4 park. 2 nights powered, shady, grassed site \$65 thereabouts with our Big 4 membership discount. Immediately after setting up we went for a swim in one of their four pools. About 3 o'clock I decided we better get out and go see something, so we headed east of Alice 80km to the Ross River Homestead. There you can camp \$13 per person per night (not cheap), camel rides, quad bike tours, pub, fuel (diesel \$1.84ltr). I spoke to a lady who was 'baby sitting' the place for her sister and husband. I showed her the credits from the movie "Quigley Down Under" which was partially filmed on the property, but left disappointed. I did find out that she used to 'manage' the Kings Canyon Resort, and admitted it was overpriced and better to stay at Kings Creek Station (something to remember). She also told me that Ross River used to be owned by Troy Dann, who overspent and went bankrupt after running the property down. He included a segment in one of his documentaries, where he was flying his helicopter whilst towing a mate on water skies. Apparently the relevant government authority took one look at it, and promptly pulled his pilots licence. Heading back to Alice I pulled over to take a photo of Trepina Creek, and promptly staked my left front tyre. It's the first puncture I've had for 7 years. A quick change then next stop Trepina Gorge itself, my favourite spot in the East MacDonnells, primarily because it is so beautiful, and more importantly you don't get the thousands of tourists each day. There is bush camping, several 'drop dunnies' and free gas BBQ's. Its self-registration but I don't know how much, probably no more than Palm Valley. We were pleasantly surprised to find water there. 2 big pools, 1 of which dropped off sheer to a depth of at least 2 ½ metres as measured by Laura with a long stick. It was also freezing cold. Of course I took lots of photos. Next time we will camp there. This gorge was also used in the movie mentioned before. Next stop Corroboree Rock, but unfortunately the sun had set and it wasn't worth taking photos. Saw 2 campervans stopped and set up for the night at another tourist spot. There were no facilities, but I also assume no sign saying they couldn't free camp there. Somewhere I read the East MacDonnells are supposed to be 1200 million years old. As any of you who know, driving west into a setting sun and the dusk twilight afterward is not fun. We had 50km to get back to Alice at about 50km/h. The Hereford cows we saw were almost impossible to see until you were right on top of them. Kangaroos I didn't even want to think about much less wild camels. Also saw a couple of wild Dingos today (what else would they be), very scrawny looking. On the way I asked Laura the following joke:- "What's the last thing that goes through a bugs mind when it hits your windscreen?" She said, "I doubt a bug would have a mind." I said, "Just answer the question." She said, "I don't know." I said, "Its arse." I was very surprised she'd not heard it before. For tea we had a bowl of cereal and Laura has gone to bed at 8 o'clock (never get her to do it at home). I've discovered more casualties of the corrugations. :- the wheel arch under the food cupboards in the camper is damaged. Everything was covered in dust, not that it mattered that much as it was also all over the floor as the lock catch had broken. My one and a

half glass bottles of Port are still intact (thankfully), but there is evidence of the aluminium beer cans rubbing against each other. I'd better insulate them before they explode, been there done that. Another victim is my 'in car' mobile phone system which no longer charges. Yes I've checked the fuse, its not that. Well time to hang up the clean washing and call it a night.

Monday 1st October

After brekky I topped off the fuel tank and jerry cans, 22 and 40 litres, and took the staked tyre to get fixed. To cut that story short, they said it was too **buggered** even for a tube. They also wanted \$20 to leave the tyre with them. We finally arrived at the Desert Park, \$50 entry 2A1C **bloody hell !!!** First thing was 'the birds of prey' exhibition. Once again really good except this time they didn't have a Wedged Tailed Eagle, a real shame as they are the biggest of them all. Laura took some photos of the Barn Owl, Kites which hang around fires picking off the roasted bugs in flight, and the hilarious Black Breasted Buzzard which, upon finding an Emu egg, picks up a suitable rock in its beak, and repeatedly throws it at the egg until it breaks open. Apparently there are only 2 types of birds in the world that do this, the other one is in Africa with Ostrich eggs. Onto the Nocturnal House which was a bit of a disappointment this time, as very few of the animals were out in the simulated moon light. The highlight of today though was an aboriginal Ranger bloke, who gave a brilliant talk and demonstration on aboriginal men and women survival tools. The womens included 3 different types of bowls, a baby carrier, a water carrier, a digging stick with heat tempered point on one end and flat chisel on the other. The woman wasn't left to make these on her own, her husband was made to do all the chisel work, burying the piece halfway in the ground to act as a vice as he worked on the other end. One bowl could take 3 or 4 days of work, and the group remained camped by the waterhole until all the work was done, often to many articles at the same time. The woman would carry her handheld grinding stone (pestle) with her, but would leave the large and heavy one (mortar) face down for another group to use. With these implements she could gather and prepare the food. The men made several weapons; to settle arguments with neighbours (which were a rare occurrence, both the arguments and meeting neighbours). They made long but relatively narrow deflection shields from the rock hard mulga trees. They also made very long spears with flat diamond shaped heads. These were rarely used, instead they were held vertical whilst walking by the head man of the group, indicating his responsibility as a leader, father and husband, and to ward off domestics. Occasionally the spear was used to dish out punishment for some crime or another, and involved spearing the culprit through the calf or thigh muscle. The hunting spear was completely different. It was made from the branch of a 'spear vine' tree, and first of all needed to be straightened and heat tempered using a fire. They would watch the sap 'boil' out the end of the spear, but would not allow it to get so hot as to 'hiss' out as we've all seen when 'green' wood is put on a campfire (as doing this dries out the wood too much and it becomes brittle). Spear vine is used as it is lighter than mulga, and can be thrown further and with more power. A shaped spike with a barb is made from mulga, then affixed with spinifex resin and kangaroo sinew. The barb is vitally important to ensure the spear stayed in and that you were assured of supper after maybe following a wounded kangaroo for 20 kilometres or more. If you were the one who threw a spear without a barb, thereby only injuring the prey whilst at the same time scaring away all its buddies, then you got your arse kicked until it was blue. The men also made a 'woomera' to add power and distance to a spear throw (by extending the length of their arm), and yes, whiteman did name the South Australian town Woomera, where they launched their rockets, after the aboriginal spear throwing tool. You can read all about early Woomera in one of Len Beadell's books, I have them all. The ranger demonstrated a woomera assisted spear throw. We were all surprised to see it fly straight and true for a good 50 metres or more. They also made a heavy mulga stick called a 'nulla nulla', which was used to beat the brains out of a wounded kangaroo or emu (to put them out of their suffering), or **to beat the crap out of** a goanna or snake, which you had by the tail, and before it could whip around and sink its teeth into you. The last weapon was a heavy fire tempered mulga 'boomerang', Contrary to what most people believe, not all aboriginal boomerangs are made to 'come back'. Central Australian aboriginals had no use for a boomerang that would come back, theirs

were often straight or slightly curved (whatever shape the branch it was made from), and were thrown low and horizontal to break legs, wings, necks and rib cages. So these were the 'tools' of the hunting men of Central Australia. Before I move on, I'll explain a couple of hunting techniques. A **mob** of kangaroos for instance would be approached quietly in a circle except for 'upwind'. As spears were launched, hopefully hitting one or more of the kangaroos, the rest of the mob would bolt away at anything up to 50km/h for a big male 'red'. The mob would then be tracked, pairs of hind feet spaced anything up to 3 metres apart indicated uninjured roos, forget them, long gone. Blood spots were obvious indicators but were not always present. A single dotted line paralleling shorter spaced pairs of hind footprints indicated the roo(s) with a 'barbed' spear stuck in its side. Eventually the wounded roo would become so weak that it would crawl along 'on all fours' dragging both the spear and its tail. You knew you were getting close when you found these tracks. The roo or emu or whatever was then '**finished off**' with the nulla nulla. Often the prey was too large and heavy to carry back to camp, so the women and children would also follow the tracks and ultimately the plume of cooking fire smoke. Now, how to prepare, cook and eat your kangaroo (as explained by the Ranger). First its head was broken open and the brains eaten, followed by all the blood, gizzards etc "Yuk!" The front legs were chopped off at the elbows, as were the rear legs which then had the hip joints dislocated so that the legs would point straight up (don't ask 'cause I don't know why). Whilst all this was going on, a large hole was scooped out in the sand, filled with firewood and set alight. Using these big flames the roo was **chucked** on to singe off all the fur. It was removed and the fire allowed to burn down to hot coals which had also heated up the sand in and around the hole. The roos tail was chopped off and laid next to the carcass on the hot coals, or sometimes on top of certain green foliage for extra taste if it was available. The whole lot was then covered in sand and allowed to slowly roast. The tail was pulled out fairly quickly, and gave an indication of how the cooking was proceeding. The meat was only cooked 'medium rare' to preserve the remaining blood and meat juices to have as a soup. So as you can see, the group had a 5 course banquet; entrails as the *entrée*', followed by soup dunked with tail chunks, the main course, then bush fruit and damper collected and made by the women. Dessert often followed later with a snake or lizard. Nothing of course was wasted, especially the long sinews from the rear legs, which made excellent binding twine as it would tighten as it shrunk in the heat. Often a quick kill could be made mid afternoon. You've been walking all day and you decide to have a bit of a sleep under a shady tree or bush. Because your head is in the dirt, you can hear large animals approaching. They don't detect you 'cause you keep still, then at the right moment 'whamo' with your boomerang or nulla nulla, instant tea. He told another story about hunting the huge bush turkeys they have around here. This was another job for the heavy bone breaking boomerang. He said the trick was to let them take off into flight, then knock them out of the sky as they were still trying to gain height. He said that way they couldn't duck under or swerve away from the boomerangs. Emus were also pretty easily hunted. A skilled mimic would lure the prey closer as they have an extremely high curiosity level, then WHAMO with the nulla nulla again. Down on the Cooper Creek, Murray and Darling River country, a different menu and hunting techniques were used. Water birds and fish were their meat source. The hunters would make, and string across the river, a net woven from sedge grass. The location was picked from either local knowledge that certain water birds always used a particular spot, or from a quick recce'. Two hunters would man the net ready to bash the brains out of as many birds as got trapped, whilst two or more were upstream of the birds to drive them toward the waiting net. Around these places you wanted your boomerang to come back, not end up in the **drink** all the time. They were not actually used to bring down the birds themselves, but to panic and guide them. The Ranger said a returning boomerang could be thrown in two ways; a long low arc of 120 degrees, or up steeply, hover like a helicopter, then return to its owner. The trick was to get all the birds panicked into taking off in the direction of the net (there's safety in numbers), then keep them low to the water by lofting the boomerangs over them, making them think they were great huge 'birds of prey' flying above. After the talk I found out something I've wanted to know for years; "how do you make spinifex resin?" Firstly you need something large to catch 'your makings' (these days a ground sheet would do). Next you

rip out a big heap of spinifex grass (careful of the spikes), lay it on the groundsheet and beat crap out of it with your nulla nulla. Gently separate the husks etc out so that you are left with a yellow powder like substance. I would now suggest you collect it and put it on a tin plate or something, lastly, you take a burning stick from your campfire and slowly wave it over the top of the powder, which melts into a black sticky resin. Whilst warm and soft it can be moulded onto a spear shaft for instance to hold the mulga tip, or to set a sharp edged piece of quartz onto the end of a 'knife' handle. Les Hiddins, the 'bush tucker man' once used some to patch a leak in a plastic jerry can very effectively. Unfortunately the bugger never showed how to make it on that TV episode. Well now we know. As it cools it hardens, and thus can be used over and over.. It takes the heat from a fire to soften it again. The last thing I did before leaving the Desert Park, was to buy the book this bloke recommended all about aboriginal 'bush tucker' and medicine (Bush Food - Aboriginal Food and herbal medicine by Jennifer Isaacs Published in Australia 2002 Cost me \$47 ISBN(10)1864368160). And just as a reminder, don't eat those delicious looking Paddy Melons I mentioned before, they are poisonous. I cut one open and showed Satoshi and Laura the lovely light green flesh dripping with juice, and the black pips. My new book says they were used to treat Scabies and Ring Worm, by warming the fruit, squeezing out the juice which was then rubbed on the affected area of skin. Found a supermarket and topped up on our 'perishables' \$144.00 (also found frozen kangaroo tails in with the frozen veggies). Spent most of the afternoon in the pool, diving and doing **acro**, until **Sev** and I got told off by some bloke from the caravan park for being too dangerous. Satoshi again cooked another perfect meal of 10 minute noodles, we all had showers, dessert and bed. This is the record, so far, of things that have been affected by the corrugations and rocks; 1 tyre destroyed, 3 tyres looking pretty sick (ultimately 2 of them gave out before we got home), sheered off lower right rear shock absorber mount on the truck, both camper shock absorbers, camper wheel arch, cupboard door catches **stuffed**, mobile phone charger stuffed, 1 jerry can worn a hole through the bottom, the trucks radio/cassette player stuffed again, and finally, my laptop computer isn't real happy. As a result of all this I've decided we'll take the 'safe' 'well travelled' bitumen road all the way home. Chambers Pillar etc will have to wait until the next trip. I almost forgot the biggest item; the 'transfer case' is jammed in high range four wheel drive and wont release. I don't think it'll be a big problem as it's not 'wound up' with torque, as the front hubs were easily disengaged. Fuel economy will **suck** as we'll be 'driving' all the front drivetrain. My only concern is what damage might occur if it decides to unlock at 100km/h.

Tuesday 2nd October

Hit the road at 8.50 with Satoshi driving, as my eyes wouldn't focus to the point that I couldn't even read a speed sign until we were right on top of it. For this reason we also gave 'The Ghan' train and museum a miss, as well as 'The Transport Hall Of Fame', both of which we did in 2000 and both of which are really worth a visit whilst in Alice. A warning about visiting the Telegraph Station (which is really worth a visit), the car park is isolated and hidden from the 'entrance'. We had 1 door lock ripped out and 1 window smashed to gain entry into our truck. We had binoculars and other important things stolen. The police told us it was probably aboriginal kids, and that it happens every day. Maybe a car alarm would offer some protection. We don't have one. Made it to Stuart's Well Roadhouse 10am 109km, obtained a brochure as it looks as good a place to camp as Eriksdunda, only cheaper. Also saw a poster advertising 'The Henley-on-Todd' regatta, held in Alice Springs each August. If you don't know what this is I'll explain; Where the Todd River runs through Alice Springs it is wide, flat, dry sand (except when in flood as it was in 2000). Teams of people make boats with no bottom in them. I once saw a boat made from empty VB cans. There is a street parade at 11am, followed by the races commencing at 1.30. The entrants all get in their boats, standing up and holding the boat at waist level. They all line up at the start, and on some sort of signal, run down the course in the soft sand. There are also other boat type events to enter. I'll have to learn more so that one day maybe, a group of RUCCIS circus friends, can enter a 'tall ship' and compete wearing stilts (its not that hard wearing stilts in soft sand, I've tried it). Obviously we wouldn't win, but we might **pick up** a novelty award. Anyway it would be fun. Back on the

road with Satoshi still driving, as my eyes slowly improve. Bought our 'once a day' (sometimes 2 or 3 times a day) treat of Magnum ice-creams \$11. Just went past a good looking Rest Area 32km north of Erldunda, or 186km south of Alice. The 'water mirages' on the road are very distinct today, I'm not sure what Satoshi thought when he saw the first one, "Is the road flooded?" maybe? He is 'coming to grips' with the vast distances between places out here, sometimes 200-300km, distances in Japan which would take most of the day to drive. I'm a bit disappointed with the lack of visible 'birds of prey'. In 2000 we saw many, this time there only seems to be black crows. I hope they aren't taking over. 12 noon arrived Kulgera and refueled, but I didn't take down the details. 2 Hot Dogs, 1 Chiko Roll, 1 ham cheese tomato sandwich, 4 post cards \$22 Departed 12.30 Crossed back into South Australia 12.50 Satoshi is quickly picking up Australian slang, he just pointed and said, "Three willy willy" meaning those numerous small tornado things caused by the desert heat. He's also getting used to the way that all the tourists, especially those towing caravans and campers, wave to each other. (I did a small survey for 1 hour today. The result was that 99% of the traffic was tourist with the odd 'road train' thrown in). It's an unwritten rule out here that if someone is broken down or stranded, and they flagged you down, you would stop and offer whatever help you could. It's a good thing, but ceases to exist when you get back to civilization. In general its not something that is picked up by the overseas visitors, hence not many of the Britz, Maui, Apollo and other rental motorhome drivers wave at you. We've noticed there's a new cool campervan company in business. "Wicked" campers are all Toyota Tarago size, and seem to cater to the younger couples. They also looked hand painted with 'wicked' across the front and different 'themes' for the rest of the body paint job. The best I've seen so far was "Jims Brazilians" with a lookalike of 'Jim' painted on the sides, and advertising the services of: 'muff management', 'specialty of armpits and moustaches', 'maps of Tassie', 'wax while u wait' etc very good. Towing conditions are good today, the road is flat and there's no wind. We'll see what sort of fuel economy we can get sitting on 100km/h, towing with the air conditioner on, and the front tailshaft, diff and axles being driven. I'll top up the fuel tank from the jerry cans and fuel up at Coober Pedy. 2.30pm arrived Marla 183km south of Kulgera. Bloody hell!!!! Have to dispose of fruit and vegetables again!!! Shit!!! And of course there's a Supermarket here to buy more. Unlike Renmark there is no actual inspection station. I got talking to a young copper stationed at Marla, and ended up giving him our lettuce and tomatoes. He told me random vehicle intercepts looking for fruit and veggies were carried out 'down south' (by some government department), but up here it was his responsibility and he couldn't care less. The potatoes I turfed in the bin. Hit the road at 3pm after more Magnums \$10. Saw quite a large 'willy willy' moving right to left which crossed the road maybe 100 metres in front of us. It was interesting to see at such close range sweeping the ground of dust, sand and grass. Just took a photo 'on the fly' of the bleak gibber stone landscape, not a tree in sight. Just saw a Wedged Tailed Eagle sitting on some roadkill, got a good look at its huge size as it took off as slow as a Jumbo Jet. As we passed the Cadney Homestead Roadhouse, we saw two freight trains, one headed south, the other north loaded with Army vehicles that looked like Armoured Personnel Carriers. Both trains were easily a kilometer or more in length, and had 3 diesel locomotives apiece. Satoshi just about had to stop, to allow 3 Wedge Tailed Eagles feasting on roadkill, enough time to take off, which they seemed reluctant to do. My eyesight has finally recovered. I don't know what the reason was, I mean I wasn't fatigued, I hadn't had a lot of alcohol to drink, maybe it was the chlorine in the pool. Today Satoshi has driven 297km Alice to Kulgera, then to the Pootnoura Rest Area 346km, a total of 643km in 8 hours, well done!! I'm so glad I took him out to teach him how to drive the truck before we left home, a real life saver. Extra good effort when you consider he's never towed anything before either. Already set up at the Rest Area was a retired couple, and their overweight Labrador 'Bella'. They had a 1976 Bedford bus motorhome towing a Suzuki Vitara in an enclosed trailer, which cost them \$85,000. The buses 6 cylinder Perkins diesel had just been 'overhauled'. They are fully self sufficient with full size household fridge and freezer, gas cooktop and oven, shower, toilet, TV, DVD and video players, air conditioning, laptop computer, 400ltr diesel tank, 380ltr water tank, deep cycle batteries, solar panels and 3kva generator. They don't stay in caravan

parks unless they plan on staying at least a week. Very nice couple who appreciated our company for the night. After we pulled in, another retired couple of 'grey nomads' pulled in in their brand new 'top of the range' 100 series Cruiser towing their immaculate gleaming white 30 foot tandem caravan, total outlay, about \$150,000. Shortly afterward a young couple pulled in in their beaten up Hi-ace van, parked some distance away and didn't join us for sunset drinks. Their outlay, maybe \$500, it sounded pretty sick. And then arrived Alex and Alice, a young 'hippyish' type English couple riding 'ex-Postie' motorbikes. They didn't have much, a very small 'swag' type bedroll each, a backpack full of clothes, a little bit of food and a small gas bottle and ring. As happens when Laura and I get talking, the conversation ultimately turned to circus. Surprise surprise Alex had his 'fire poi' with him, but he didn't have any kerosene (the usual fuel used), so I poured some diesel into an old car hubcap I found. It was a bit smoky as expected, but worked really well and burnt for a long time. Laura took several time elapsed photos which turned out really great. We then convinced Alex to get up on Satoshi's stilts, which with a bit of tuition by yours truly, he mastered pretty quickly, moving on to juggling at the same time as we do. I put on my 'skippy' stilts for a bit, but its not the safest thing to do in the dark and on gravel. Laura pranced and danced around on her stilts. After a while we turned off all the lights and spent some time gazing at the squillions of stars. The southbound freight train passed us with its 99 carriages, and the driver acknowledged our waves with several horn blasts. About 11 o'clock, after we'd all gone to bed, a car load of aboriginals arrived and promptly sat down in a circle not far from us. To my surprise they didn't stay long, but I kept my eye on them anyway. About an hour later the wind just suddenly blew in, and continued strongly for the rest of the night. It also got quite cool..

Wednesday 3rd October

Most of the others left by 8, leaving Alex Alice us and the other couple we didn't get to meet. Their van was very reluctant to start, and sounded like a 'chaff cutter'. Alice eventually took off after finally getting her bike started. Alex normally gives her a 10-15 minute head start. To make matters worse the wind was now blowing straight into us from the southwest, bloody typical. We hit the road at 8.50. The only thing of note was another Wedged Tailed Eagle that took off as we approached. I pulled over well past its roadkill meal hoping to get some photographs, but it kept its distance waiting for us to leave. Passed Alex and Alice and arrived at Coober Pedy at 10am, only 77km today. Oasis Big 4 caravan park, powered site \$26, not too bad. I'm assuming this is the best caravan park in town, but if it is, the others must be real **dives**. The only trees that grow here are the ones that can survive without water. There are no water restrictions in Coober Pedy as there is lots of it. The town supply comes from an '**Artesian Basin**' bore 17km north of town. It tastes disgusting and you wont find it for free anywhere in town, consequently no one wastes money on grass. On our previous visit in 2000 we were shown one residential property in town that did have nice green grass and a beautiful garden, I seem to remember the water required to achieve this cost something like \$20,000 a year. We didn't see it this time, maybe they went broke. Coober Pedy is a place which has to be 'experienced'. It really is literally a dump, as a lot of the front yards look like 'wrecking yards' with discarded machinery. I took quite a few photographs, but in particular some photos of the vehicles that had been converted into an opal mining machine called a 'blower'. We took ourselves to the Desert Cave hotel which is the only underground hotel in the world, according to them. Took some photos of course.. After that we went and had a look at a church, as it was also underground and free (something there's very little of in Coober Pedy). To the best of our knowledge, the only afternoon tour is at the Umoona Cave, next to the Desert Cave in the main street (it's the one with the big space ship in the front yard. I kid you not). I was pleasantly surprised by the tour cost, only \$25 for the 3 of us. Umoona used to be a working opal mine right in the centre of town, but as mining within the town precincts is now forbidden, it has been turned into a tourist attraction, and is very good (it is the tour I would recommend). The tour starts with a triple screen 18 minute documentary about the history of opal mining, a tour of an underground house, which is called a 'dugout', and then the mine tour itself. Very interesting and we took lots of photos. For those like me that suffer from a bit of claustrophobia, this tour was perfectly alright. Bought Sheryl a nice opal and gold

necklace, only \$40, a very nice timber map of Australia with thermometer \$14, and 2 tea towels (bush recipes and Waltzing Matilda), both cheap. On the way to the caravan park I fuelled up at Bull's depot next door, which offers a 2c a litre discount on fuel for being a Big 4 customer. 67ltrs \$98 We've already had 2 lots of ice-creams today, 3 Magnums \$10 and 2 Billabongs \$2.70 Satoshi wanted to go swimming so we ventured over to the campgrounds indoor swimming pool. It is indoor by the fact that it is inside a large converted water tank, and because it gets no sun, it is freezing cold. We were in and out in 2 minutes flat, actually looking forward to standing in the sun to warm up. Typical of me I got talking to a bloke. He was from America, and was very unusual in that he wasn't full of his own self importance (he was actually a pleasure to talk to), and he was full of admiration of our country, and was ready to come live here. Not far from our camp are 2 brand new gas BBQ's. Camped adjacent to them were 4 families from **Mooroolbark** and surrounds. They had about 20 kids. Typical of me once again I started talking to them (you don't want to stand still around me for too long, I'm getting to be just like Eddie Tabaka. "G'day mate, 'owyer goin'?"") Laura had wandered over and had picked up 3 stones and began to juggle them. That of course led to circus talk. One of the mums said that she knew of our circus group, and had actually been to Kilsyth to watch us train, eager to ask questions. Later that evening she wrote down the www.ruccis.com.au on the sides of my stilts. I told them all about the fun we have, and we may see them next Term. After tea, the 3 of us took our 'bag of tricks' over to their camp, Sev and I on our stilts of course. They wanted to see what I could do on my 'skippys' so I did a few jumps hops and running. For an old bloke like me they are a real work-out. As I'd had them on for over an hour at that stage, I'd lost all feeling in my lower legs and feet from the bindings which need to be tight, I was also pretty stuffed, so I took them off. Immediately one of the dads asked if he could try them. Initially his manly bravado had him declining to wear knee pads and wrist protectors. 10 seconds after standing him up he came to his senses and requested the protective gear, smart move. My stilts will buck you off faster than a rodeo bull if you don't respect them. This is a guy who had never been on any sort of stilts before, but who rode trail bikes and was a competition 'water-ski racer'. He was full of self confidence but not cocky, and had no qualms holding my hands until he found his balance. He is now the oldest student I have taught at the age of 47. After 5 minutes of tuition he was off, so I turned my attention to the kids, leaving him with it. I could hear his laboured breathing from the exertion (and saw him 2 ½ hours later running on them, well done). In all, Sev and I must have taught 12 kids, from about 5 to 14 years old, how to stilt. We also taught some poi and juggling, which is very hard to do in the dark. About midnight we **called it quits**. I saw a few people talking to Satoshi, and everytime I looked he had juggling balls in his hands. I hope he had a pleasant evening. It would have been very tiring for him having half a dozen different conversations going on at once. I know from my own experience, whilst traveling in Europe, that it is very pleasant to find someone who speaks your language, and with whom you can have a conversation without it being a real chore. We have seen a lot of Asian tourists on this trip, and we keep asking Satoshi if they're Japanese and can he understand them. He tells us most are Chinese, some Korean and Vietnamese (I'm sorry to say that I cant tell them apart). Right at the end of the night this guy wandered over. He was very **pissed**. I got the impression that he had a severe inferiority complex, and started **giving all of us the shits**. He stuck to us like 'shit to a blanket' (self explanatory). He was from Tasmania. Even though I feigned yawning, he followed us over to our camp. **Piss Off!** Despite him we had a really good evening and made a lot of new friends. It may end up that we all meet up tomorrow tonight at Melrose, if we do we'll have more fun. Typically I was rewarded, by grateful appreciative parents, of some alcoholic liquid refreshment in the form of cold beer. Sev had some hot chocolate, and I assume (I hope), that Satoshi was also offered something, as he is after all a member of our family.

Thursday 4th October

As you might expect we had a bit of a slow start today, but still managed to hit the road by 8.45. Bought a 2ltr bottle of sugar free cordial, to try and make the crappy Kings Canyon water taste better. One last drive up the main street of Coober Pedy. It seems that every business in town is trying to outdo everyone else with advertising. There's 1001 signs which are impossible to read. Up the hill

adjacent to the 'big windlass', there's this funny little Asian guy and his opal and souvenir shop. I didn't go back, but I reckon he'd maybe be worth a visit. To my knowledge, there are only 2 places in town that don't sell opal, the church and the police station. (more on Coober Pedy later) I'm letting Satoshi drive again this morning so that I can catch up on my diary. I showed him a sign that said the next town, the Glendambo Roadhouse, is 287km away, and that there's absolutely nothing in between, just desert. Took one photo. The highway south of Coober Pedy has quite a long stretch which induces a motion in your vehicle similar to riding a **bucking bronco**. It is impossible to write neatly so I gave up trying. I said "bloody hell", then the Jewish equivalent "oi guvale", the Italian "fungul" and Satoshi told me that "dekoboko" translated roughly into "crap" if I understood him correctly. Apparently, out of all my family, he finds me the most difficult to understand, I'm not surprised (sorry). 10.30 158km Satoshi just overtook his first 'road train', 65 metres of Prime Mover, 1st full size tri-axle semi-trailer, 1st dolly, 2nd full size tri-axle, 2nd dolly, 3rd full sized tri-axle, that's 62 wheels. 10.45 178km Bon Bon Rest Area toilets, shade, table and seats, water tank. Found a vine with wild 'bush tomatoes' growing on it, fingernail up to plum sized, green. The photo in my book matches what I saw, and says they stay green and are usually safe to eat, but recommends asking a local Aboriginals advice. Laura has a severe case of boredom and doesn't want to do anything I suggest. The only solution is to talk Circue du Soleil, so I quizzed her on the various acts and shows. I also put her to the task of drawing a detailed diagram of a **'german wheel'**. So far its kept her busy for about an hour. 11.50 262km Stopped at Glendambo for lunch - 1 pie, 1 pasty, 1 sausage roll, 1 cake \$13 and 2 boomerangs \$28 Saw a 3 tanker road-train parked so I took a photo of it. As we were leaving at 12.20 we saw our friends from last night pull in. After you cross over the rail line (a high man-made hump and tunnel), the landscape deteriorates into the saltbush country as you near the big salt lakes. Its not pretty country to look at like sand dune country, and continues on like this until you pass Port Augusta (that is if you turn east). 1.05pm stopped to take 5 panoramic photos of Lake Hart. 1.45 380km Pimba 38ltrs diesel \$60 \$1.599ltr Stopped another 20km down the road to take some photos of Island Lagoon. Discovered the trucks right rear tyre was half flat. Its funny you know, but with hindsight being 20/20 as it is, I should've known the tyre was going flat slowly. I'd been driving with my window down and had heard a rhythmic 'scratch' sound every revolution of the wheel. It's the same sound you hear when you adjust drum brakes and spin the wheel by hand, or when there's a bit of dust in the brake drum. I didn't worry about it as we'd been **eating a lot of dust** in the previous week. The noise turned out not to be a 'scratch' sound but 'ssst' 'ssst' 'ssst' etc. One 'ssst' for every wheel rotation, because there was a small slit in the tyre sidewall. Every time the slit was at the bottom, it opened up as the tyre flexed and release a small amount of pressurized air 'ssst'. Between Satoshi Laura and I we changed it for one of the two spares on the back of the camper. Trouble was, when I released the full weight of the truck onto it from the jack, I discovered that it must have had a slow leak also, as it had dropped from 45psi to 25psi in a week. So off with it and change it for my third spare. If worse comes to worse I can always put it on the camper half flat, and the campers fully inflated tyre on the truck, as half the campers weight is less than a quarter of the trucks (another reason I put matching wheels on the camper). If we were really desperate, I'd just lever one side of the tyre off the rim, stuff it **choc-o-block** full of grass and put it back on. It'd still be half flat but better than completely flat. I could then drive slowly to the next town. Back on the road again, there's an excellent looking Rest Area about halfway between Pimba and Port Augusta called Ranges View, as it has a spectacular view of the Mt Remarkable Range, and would be very pleasant at sunset. Arrived Port Augusta and filled the tank, and us, with diesel and ice-creams. 42ltrs \$61 \$1.399ltr Fuel economy wasn't bad for the 627km we've so far done today 7km/ltr even though I was pushing it along at 110-115km/h. Left Pt Augusta (headed east) up through Horrocks Gap taking some photos of the salt lake 'on the fly'. Arrived Melrose 5.10pm 693km total today The caravan park was 'full as' so we opted for a bit of shaded grass up in the bush well away from everyone else, unpowered \$19 and we have our own toilet block. Another reason I chose to keep away from everyone else is that I always feel pretty **'grotty' and 'feral'** when I come in from the bush. It's a feeling I actually like, and

don't feel ready to fit in with the clean people and their clean cars and caravans. As soon as I sat down to write this, a bloody mozzie attacked me, something we hadn't had to put up with for the last week. So it was on with long trousers and top. The sun had already dropped below the ridge west of us when we arrived, and now at 6.45 its almost too dark to write this without a light. You're not supposed to use generators here, but I've used another method to cut out the small amount of noise mine makes; I found a 44 gallon (200 litre) drum, laid it on its side behind a big tree facing away from everyone. I then started the generator and put it inside the drum. At 20 metres you couldn't even hear it. I doubt our new found friends from last night will be joining us, depending on how long they stopped to look at Woomera. Laura cooked tea, Satoshi has just headed off through the scrub, with a torch, to have a shower. Hope he doesn't run into a kangaroo as there are 2 right near me. At this point in time, of writing, I'd like to go back to Coober Pedy. Back in the Roman Empire days, the only opals in the world were dug up by peasant slaves working in a secret mine in Hungary. A little later some were found in South Africa. The quality then, compared to what comes out of Coober Pedy, was pretty crappy, but in those days it was all there was, so the 'upper class' Romans adorned themselves with it as jewellery. This was in about 1200AD, and Australia had not been discovered yet (by white man at least). I'll mention here that the name Coober Pedy came from the aboriginals and means 'white mans burrows'. They are not in the least bit interested in going underground, in fact I believe they are actually afraid to do so, not that I blame them. Opal is a lot like diamond in that it is formed under great pressure over a very long time. It comes from rainwater seeping down through the silica rich sand, that was once the shoreline of the inland sea that Central Australia was millions of years ago. The flashes of colour comes from the tiny particles of water that are trapped within the silica (glass basically), which refract light into a rainbow. Australian opal comes in 3 forms; white opaque opal called 'poche' which isn't worth anything, and accounts for 95% of all opal dug up in Coober Pedy. Then there is the clear opal flashing with colours, a piece of this the size of your thumbnail is worth thousands of dollars. The best though is black opal with the fire within. It is clear opal which has also trapped carbon. It is very rare and worth a great deal of money. These days, Australian opal is the best in the world. Opal was first discovered, accidentally, at Coober Pedy in 1817. It was initially taken to London and New York 'for sale', but it was suspected of being fake as it had too much colour. Mining in Coober Pedy really **kicked off** with the return of soldiers from World War 1, who were accustomed to tunneling and living underground. All mining was done with a pick and shovel, enduring Central Australia's summer heat of 40+ Celsius, which is why most of Coober Pedy's residents live underground, well the lucky ones do. Gelignite came to the mine fields and explosives are still used today. In fact we saw a huge road train of explosives at the Pimba Roadhouse, well it wasn't exactly at the Roadhouse, more like half a kilometer away all on its own. Opal around Coober Pedy is found in veins, like gold is in quartz, predominantly 12 and 30 metres underground. In the old days, a shaft was sunk by hand, then the men would 'drift' along hoping to at least find a vein of 'poche' initially, then hopefully 'clear' or 'black' opal. They usually worked in 3's with 1 man lowered into the shaft by his mates using a 'windlass'. By candle light he would dig out the rock, fill canvas buckets, drag it back to the shaft where it would be winched to the surface by his mates. Only when it was up top did they **'noodle'** through it looking for that very small piece that could make them rich. With the advent of explosives, 'shot' holes were drilled, plugged with explosives, fuses lit, and then you had to run **like buggery** along the drift, and hopefully around a corner where it was a bit safer. After the explosion there was a hell of a lot of work shoveling the rock into the buckets and so on. When motor vehicles were invented, things got better. The first motor car to reach Coober Pedy was in 1918. Remember, there was no road then. What a trip that must have been! After World War 2 there were a lot of surplus motor vehicles about, and a lot of them found their way to the mining fields. Most are still there today having been modified into the 'blowers' I mentioned earlier. As I said, I toured around town taking photos of these vehicles; buses, old Blitz trucks, all of them from the 40's and 50's. The 'blower' was an invention of an Australian. It is actually a very powerful vacuum cleaner for rock. The vehicles engine provides the power, and a series of 300mm steel pipes leads from the pump, down the shaft and

along the drift to where you're working. All they have to do now is shovel the rock into the end of the pipe and it gets sucked to the surface and deposited in a pile. God help you if you got sucked up. It wasn't mentioned during the tour we did, so I assume it wasn't a big problem. Tunneling machines came next and were a New Zealand invention. There are horizontal machines that look like small bulldozers crossed with a rotary hoe that moves up and down the wall as it chews it out. It has a corkscrew arrangement that feeds the rock directly into the pipe. Then there are radial machines, much the same as would have been used to dig Melbourne's City Loop rail and Freeway tunnels. They dig a circular tunnel about 2 metres in diameter. Last but not least, a German invention, called a 'Caldwell Drill' came along which digs the vertical shaft in a nice neat 1 metre diameter hole. A 30 metre shaft will only cost you about \$600. To purchase all 3 of these machines will only **set you back** about \$30,000, but they are real heaps of junk. As I've already said, mining is no longer permitted in town, but there are lots of mines there. For a radius of about 50km, there are thousands of mines, most of which produced nothing. Another form of opal mining is the 'open cut' method using bulldozers with men called 'pickers' walking behind sifting through the rubble. Anyone can 'stake a claim' or 're-open' an abandoned claim. It is forbidden to 'fill in' shafts as it would create a dangerous situation. A 'claim' for 12 months costs very little, only \$240 for a 50 x 50 metre patch of ground. You have mineral rights down to 30 metres. At home, we were told you only have mineral rights down to 7 feet (2.1 metres), then it belongs to the government (so don't go digging for oil under your house). For your claim to remain current, you must actively mine it for a minimum of 20 hours a week. Somehow this is 'policed', as is remaining inside the boundaries of your claim. So, as you can see, if you'd like to have a 'change of scenery' for a year, it doesn't necessarily have to cost a lot of money. Living above ground wouldn't exactly be very pleasant in Summer (living on, or under, your claim is not permitted). Which brings me to 'dugouts'. They are called 'dugouts' because they are literally dug out of the side of a hill. Coober Pedy is relatively hilly. Because they are not dug down, your ceiling can be anywhere from 1 metre thick to 10 or more metres thick. From the outside, all you see is a front yard of bare dirt (usually with the scrap heap of machinery), a bit of corrugated iron verandah roof with a door set into it, that's it. They are not pretty to look at. Just inside the front door are the 'wet' areas, kitchen, bathroom, toilet and laundry. This is done so that the plumbing doesn't have to be run far. I have no idea if they have septic tanks or a sewerage system. The layout of the rest of your house is then up to your imagination. Originally they were hand dug, and hence fairly rugged. I actually like that sort of finish, as I created that when I built our own mudbrick house. These days, both the horizontal and rotary machines are used, therefore walls and ceilings can be flat or curved, whatever you like. Room sizes can be quite large as the rock is very stable, sort of a conglomerate like The Olgas. No 'shoreing up' timber is required (just as well 'cause there's not a bloody tree in sight). Walls between the rooms are left about a metre thick. There has never been a cave-in that has occurred naturally, and only a couple (in mines) that were caused by foolish use of too much explosive. Wiring for power points and lighting is inserted into grooves cut into the rock, and then rendered over again. All floors are carpeted or tiled. There is no need for either heating or air conditioning as the temperature inside always remains between 22 and 26 degrees. All ceilings and walls are sealed with something like 'Bondcrete', a PVA glue thinned with water (mudbrick houses are finished in exactly the same way so that they are dust free). Dugouts sell for between \$50,000 and \$350,000. They are sought after and 're-sell' very easily. I mentioned earlier that mining is no longer permitted in the town, extensions to your dugout are. We were told that recently a couple extended their home for only a couple of thousand dollars, and in the process found opal worth a quarter of a million dollars. Well, that brings this chapter to a close, except to say that if I wanted to move to Coober Pedy for a year, I'd be doing it on my own, Sheryl **didn't want a bar of it**. Laura and Satoshi are feeding and patting a young female kangaroo that has been hanging around our camp, and I'm **kicking back** with a cold beer looking at the '**Milky Way**', 'Southern Cross' and 50 trillion squillion other stars. Upon arrival here in Melrose, the speedo ticked over exactly 5,000km since leaving home 13 days ago.

The temperature overnight dropped right down and was quite chilly. I'm up early and found the same kangaroo as last night sitting outside the camper perhaps waiting for breakfast. All it got was a scratch behind the ear on my way to a shower (about time I got a little less feral). I'm now sitting here in the bush in a small patch of morning sunlight, listening to the birds and watching a kookaburra that just swooped down and pounced on something. Its now returned to the tree and is in the process of killing or tenderizing its meal by bashing it against the branch. Laura and Satoshi are now both up, and its 7.30. Its going to be another beautiful day. We'll do about 500km today, and hopefully find a place along the Murray River near Mildura to 'freecamp'. Front right tyre was **looking a bit sad** so I checked all the pressures at a small town called Wirrabara, and so felt obliged to buy some diesel, 16ltrs \$23 \$1.389ltr

Next stop was the beautiful town of Laura. This time we took the opportunity to take a few photos of some of the late 1800's built houses. Peppercorn trees line the wide divided main street, and are present in many of the yards, as they were planted by the early pioneer settlers both for shade and so that they could have pepper on their meals. The trees were all in fruit (pink) and inside is the brown kernel, which when dried shrivel up and turn black, which is the way we buy it. Laura (the town not my daughter), advertises itself as the 'Folk Fair' capitol of South Australia. The Fair is to be next held on the 5th and 6th of April 2008. Maybe we'll have to make a special trip over for it. The town of Gladstone has an impressive high walled stone prison which offered 'bed and breakfast' (probably with the odd beating or whipping) from 1881 to 1975. Took several photos of it including the horse now standing solitary guard. I'd been wanting to show Satoshi a 'windmill' and explain how they worked and what it was for. Found one in a paddock near the road, so we (carefully) hopped over the barbed wire fence and inspected the 'pump' and 'automatic float level' on the drinking trough. Every couple of kilometers I'd find something else to photograph, usually another old abandoned stone cottage, dry rock wall or windmill. On one occasion a 'crop dusting' plane roared out of a paddock next to us, but continued onto another some distance away, and didn't offer a decent photo shot. Whilst traveling we've seen whole paddocks full of beautiful purple flowers, of course despite its beauty, it is a weed called 'Paterson's Curse'. We stopped just outside Mt Bryan where Laura took a panoramic series of photographs of the distant hills all green and purple, beautiful. Along this particular road, the edges of the bitumen are lined with 'ripple strip', that fine corrugated white line, which when driven on, vibrates your bum through the seat. I drove on it to stir Satoshi as he was dozing. Doing it reminds me of a story my mother once told me (as it had happened to her during one of her senior moments, if you know what I mean). She was driving her car one day, and must've drifted to the left onto the ripple strip. All of a sudden there was all this noise and vibration. She immediately stopped thinking something catastrophic had happened to the car. When the RACQ mechanic arrived, she told him the symptoms and as there was nothing apparently wrong, he took it for a test drive. On his return he said, "I'm sorry ma'am but I cant find anything wrong, maybe you better come with me." Not 5 seconds after they took off mum screamed, "That's it, that's the noise!" You have to imagine the amount of restraint that poor bloke must have had to exercise, as he calmly explained to my mother what a ripple strip was. Heaven help the **'old timers'**.

Back to today. Heading east you arrive at a T intersection just north of the town of Morgan. There you find almost identical road signs pointing to the same places both left and right! "What the #%!@*? is going on here?" Left is the back road to Renmark which we had used on the way over. Right takes you into Morgan itself, which is a nice little town on the Murray River. Just up on the right is an excellent bakery where we bought pies and stuff for lunch \$16. Keep going the same direction, south, and you'll see a big sign pointing to Waikeri, Bamera, and Renmark via the A20 highway, and the car ferry across the river. Took several photos as we sat in the park, eating lunch, and admiring the view. The ferry is free of charge and operates 24/7. A little way up the road, I spotted a Blue Tongue Lizard trying to cross the road. I quickly stopped, chucked a U turn and went back. He must've known I was after him 'cause he was **'trying to do a runner'** on me. He was a feisty little thing and more than ready to **'have a go'** when he saw he couldn't outrun me on his stumpy little legs and fat guts (his or mine?). You do

have to exercise some caution when handling these little guys as, despite having no teeth, they do have sharp boney jaws for crunching up grasshoppers and such, and will latch firmly onto your finger. I used the same trick on him as I use on kids when pretending that one of my fingers is a mozzie attacking them, distract them with one in front whilst coming in behind with the other hand. It was then easy to grab him at the back of the neck and gently put him on my outstretched hand. Once he had hold of me with his 4 feet he relaxed, and stopped sticking his broad flat blue tongue out at us. We gave him a little scratch and I carried him across the busy road and put him under a saltbush. I hope that's what he wanted as I didn't want to leave him in the middle of the road. Several photos I'm starting to feel like Malcolm Douglas, Les Hiddins or David Attenborough or someone. That reminds me of something, do you remember ever seeing Paul Hogan's comedy character David Rabbitburrow? I remember one episode where he's got this hollow bit of log that he sticks his hand down nearly up to his armpit. He says, "Ah, I think I've got something." His hand pops out another hole and he grabs his inner thigh right next to the 'family jewels' (you can work that one out on your own Satoshi). A quick top up of diesel at Waikeri 30ltrs \$43 \$1.40ltr and swapped places with Satoshi for the last 200km or so, so that I could write this. Arrived in Mildura 4.30, crossed the Murray again, via the George Chaffey Bridge, into New South Wales and continued on to Gol Gol only a couple of kilometers down the road, arriving at 4.45. 521km in just over 8 hours. Victorian, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland schools are now all on holidays so the caravan parks were all full, including this 'Top Tourist' one. \$26 unpowered but we have shady gumtrees and green grass, but are surrounded by clean and shiny four wheel drives and caravans that have never seen a dusty road even. I feel so out of place here, put me back in the desert with the sand, rocks and spinifex please. Before, I mentioned the George Chaffey Bridge on purpose. The bridge is actually New South Wales territory until it lands on Victorian soil. The Murray River is the same, including the bank on the Victorian side up to 'the high water mark', which is very arbitrary and open to interpretation. I'll tell you a little story about that shortly. Now, when I was in the police force, I was part of a special 'task force' that persecuted 'drink drivers' all over the State. My mate, Ian, and I were ruthless killers who would stop at nothing to obliterate these drivers from our roads. We worked 12 hour days, for 8 hours pay, had a string of very sneaky non-police looking cars, and were known personally to the top 'brass' by reputation. We caught more drink drivers than anyone else, and in places where others couldn't. We were the best of the best, and I have the documents to prove it. Back then we were known as Smokey (me) and The Bandit (Ian). In fact for my whole 28 year career I was called Smokey and nothing else. On one particular occasion, I was 'in charge' of a large operation in the Mildura area. I had set up a 'booze bus' on the Victorian side of the George Chaffey Bridge. Traffic going to or from New South Wales was stopped and the drivers tested for the presence of alcohol. The booze bus was out of site of those coming from New South Wales, until they came over the crest of the bridge and saw it about 200 metres ahead. This night I was standing outside just watching when this car came over the crest, stopped, and commenced reversing back up the slope. I jumped in my car and took off after it, catching up just the other side of the bridge. I was amazed the car had stopped and as I pulled up next to it, the driver got out with a smile on his face. As I started to talk to him, he said, "#\$%@ off, I'm in New South Wales and you're a Victorian copper." I said, "True, but let me show you my New South Wales Special Constable identity which gives me all the powers I need over here." He then attempted to get back in his car and drive off, except I persuaded him not to, which ended in him wearing my handcuffs, and being arrested for biting my clenched hand, if you know what I mean? To finish this saga, the cream on the cake is that his name was also Kevin Dawson, same as mine. I've probably got the paperwork to prove it. Some things are too precious to throw away, unless the rats or possums have eaten it. True story. Now then, I'm going to tell you another true story involving 'the border'. Each year the "Southern 80 water-ski race" is held at Echuca on the Murray River. Ian and I were in our usual 'scruffies' (T shirts, jeans and hiking boots, our uniform), patrolling the riverside dirt tracks in our unmarked Nissan Patrol. I prop this guy driving a Holden Panel Van, no registration, kids sitting on the unregistered empty boat trailer. He's pissed and returns a positive reading on the roadside 'preliminary

breath test'. I take down all the usual details of time, date, place (in particular), and the van and trailer chassis and engine numbers so as to be able to identify them. We cart this bloke back to Echuca and breath test him. It was an average reading, over .05, but it didn't matter as he had been caught before, and was restricted to a zero blood alcohol concentration when driving. My office was in Moonee Ponds at the time and he lived in Essendon. I set the court case to be at Echuca, (a) because I like the place, (b) because I can by law, and (c) because it would cost him a tank of fuel at least to get there, if he was stupid enough to drive himself. I won, he lost and he had driven himself. I know that because we waited and watched to see if would drive home, just having had his licence cancelled. We eventually gave up, and went and had a celebratory drink at our motel. A couple of weeks later, I get this 'Notice of Appeal', stating that he wants to fight the Magistrate's decision in the County Court of Melbourne. His choice of venue this time, fine by me. I was really looking forward to this fight, as he had retained the services of a Barrister named Peter Billings. No one likes this guy, including a lot of other Barristers, and most Magistrates and County and Supreme Court Judges. He loses 99% of the time. He tries to run stupid technical defences as he did in this case. We're in the court, and I'm in the witness box being 'cross examined' by Billings. I am not allowed to produce maps, photographs or anything in relation to 'the point of interception' (where I originally propped him). I am given a whiteboard and texta, and have to draw and describe the scene. Every fence post, log, tree and blade of grass, including the distance to the river. When I'm finished, Ian is brought in and goes through the same rigmarole. Some minor points are different, so Billings pounces on 'the distance to the river bank'. He tries moving 'the point of interception' into New South Wales as I had used Victorian legislation throughout the whole procedure. I am sent off to the big Library in Melbourne, and unearth an Act of Parliament which proclaims the strip of land alongside the river on the Victorian side as New South Wales Crown Land, for a distance of '2 chains' from the 'high water mark' (a cricket pitch is 1 chain or 22 yards long). The Act is from the 1800's. Still Billings argues what is 'the high water mark'? Court is adjourned so that we can all travel to Echuca, so that Ian and I (separately of course), can show the Judge, Prosecutor and Billings the 'point of interception'. Ian and I had previously had excursions like this, so it was easy for Ian to follow my tyre tracks in the dust, and stop exactly where I stopped. The fence posts, logs, trees, blades of grass and river were where we said they were. Back to Melbourne. The Judge says, "Mr Billings I find the matter, in relation to 'the point of interception', to be in favour of the Prosecution. Do you have any other arguments?" Having already opened his mouth and put his foot in it, he now commenced to shove it down his throat. Next argument; "... for a charge of...(drink driving)...to be brought...(blah blah blah) my client would have to have been driving a 'motor vehicle'. If you look carefully at the definition of a motor vehicle in the Road Safety Act, it includes that it 'must be used or intended for use on a highway. The Court has just decided that where my client had been driving, was not a highway, but Crown Land. Therefore I submit that the vehicle was not used or intended for use on a highway as it was unregistered, and had been purchased as a 'farm vehicle' and never to be driven on a highway again." Good try. By this time the Judge, a woman, had had a 'guts full' of Billings and his bullshit by now. I'm again in the witness box, and the Judge turned to me, smiled, and said, "Senior, did this Holden Panel Van have wheels and a motor? Was it being driven by the defendant?" "Yes your Honour." "Thank you, you can step down. Mr Billings, your Appeal is dismissed." With that she up and walked out of the Court with a pleased smug look on her face. The moral to this story then, is that the border between the 2 States is not as clear as you think. You could be standing on the river bank on the Victorian side fishing, and still be in New South Wales, depending on how far back you are. As far as which State's fishing licence you need, it doesn't matter as your hook and bait are in the water, which New South Wales owns. Back to reality, we have just treated ourselves to a pizza for the first time this trip. Laura and Satoshi sat in the dirt on their bums to eat it, aka, aboriginal style. Apparently its raining in Melbourne, and the sky here in Gol Gol has just completely clouded over, bugger! (K'so!)

A very slow start today, didn't get up early, and didn't hit the road until 9.30. Laura and I were ready to go, but Satoshi had disappeared. We could've easily left him behind as he makes so much noise, never shuts up or stops talking (only kidding, he's as quiet as a mouse). 9.50 36km east, good Rest Area called 'Mallee Fowl' with good shade, toilets, table and seats, BBQ, lots of firewood, should've stayed here last night. Next time. Sent Laura to find some mulga sticks suitable to 'whittle' with my pocket knife, into a nulla nulla, woomera and boomerang for her school assignment. 10.45 105km there's a sign pointing left to Belsar Island on the Murray River. Its all Crown Land and excellent 'free camping' (no facilities), with lots of lovely sandy beaches on the inside curves of the river. Sheryl and I camped there pre kids, and with Luke as a baby. Its not well signposted but I seem to recall going over a hump through a gate just off the highway. 11am 128km Bounbary Bend Chucked 40ltrs of diesel in the tank from the jerry cans 5 pies and 1 sausage roll \$20 Behind the General Store, which sells fuel, ice and grog, there's quite a nice looking caravan park, but the highway is between it and the river. Opposite the store is a track that would lead to some nice 'free camping' sites, but you would want some company as we're still close to Robinvale, the number 2 'dekoboko k'so' hole in Victoria. Moe has the honours of being number 1 in my book. Took 2 photos Arrived Swan Hill 1 o'clock. After being 'hemmed in', I've decided on the Pental Island Holiday Farm 5km east of town. A powered site \$23 a night. We've stayed here before. These days the camp ground is very modern, and they even have their own boat ramp into the river. There are a few 'grey nomads' here, but we've been able to distance ourselves from them a bit. We checked out the Pioneer Settlement and discovered the opening hours were 9.30-4 so we've decided on a bludge afternoon, and sightsee tomorrow. Only 230km today in 3 ½ hours. Took a stroll over to the river, and checked out the shearing shed, a couple of windmills, and some old wagons. Photos Whilst I've got the time, I'll do a quick 'tally up' of the trip so far. 16 days 6,150km 830ltrs of diesel \$1,170, average \$1.40ltr, average 7.4km/ltr (more favourable winds would increase this, I can get 10km/ltr) camping fees \$407 sightseeing admissions \$256 souvenirs and ice-creams etc about \$250 food purchased before and during trip about \$250 Total about \$2,330 or \$145 per day A bit expensive, I generally aim for about \$100 a day, which is achievable if you don't travel so far each day, and I usually prefer to take things much slower, but this time we didn't have that luxury. Laura and Satoshi are both asleep, so I've decided to 'drop the trucks front tail shaft out' (remove it), as I'm still a bit concerned it might go 'bang' in a big way. Its something I should've done when I first noticed the problem. Fortunately I've brought my extensive tool kit, and besides its only 8 nuts needing to be removed. 2 hours later it was out!! Bloody hell!! I swear the guy in Japan did the nuts up with an impact driver to every bit of the 150 foot/pounds tension the book said. At least now its something I can forget about until we get home. Tea was a very simple affair, 2 minute noodles. Its dropped in temperature since the sun has set, to the point where we have on our warm jackets for the first time. (Heard next morning it was only 2 degrees) Laura is whittling away at the mulga wood, its very hard to start with, and when tempered with fire, it becomes even harder. We sat outside, rugged up against the cold, staring at the stars. We saw lots of 'shooting stars' which could have been small meteorites or pieces of launched space junk burning up as they re-entered Earths atmosphere. Didn't spot any satellites tonight. Its very difficult to spot a weather satellite as they remain in their 'geosynchronous orbit' (means despite traveling at over 20,000km/h, they remain fixed above a specific piece of the earth below, keeping pace with the earths rotation). Most of them are up near the equator and only move slowly in relation to the stars. Other satellites, like those carrying GPS and EPIRB equipment, travel in a huge zig-zag orbit thousands of kilometers north and south of the equator. Over Australia they usually travel south-east to north-west. They will appear to be a moving star, traveling fast enough that it only takes them a couple of minutes to transit the sphere of sky we can see. For those of you interested in how to find south at night, find the Southern Cross Constellation. Look at the sky in a general direction towards where most of the stars are thicker, that's the Milky Way. Look for 4 stars in a kite pattern, they may be upright, at an angle or on their side. There is a 5th small faint star inside the kite in the lower right quadrant. Its not always

easy to see if there's moonlight or other ambient light around. Now that you've found the kite, imagine it standing upright, then look to the left and slightly lower, and you will see 2 bright stars in line with the top star of the kite, these are 'the Pointers', and are the 2nd and 3rd first stars you will see every night (the first star always is a single bright star to the west). Having now found the 'Southern Cross', draw a line down through it from the top star through the bottom star, and extend it a bit. Now draw a line between the 2 'pointers', and halfway between the 2, draw a line down at a 90 degree angle to the first. Where this line intersects the other line, that is South. A bit complicated but it is an easy star constellation to find once you know what to look for, and will always show you south regardless of which way it is in the sky. North can be found during the day also, either by observing where the sun rises and sets (but that takes all day), or by knowing the time. Let us say that it's 9 o'clock in the morning. Draw a round clock face in the dirt. Look up at the sun, and put the number 12 on that side of your clock face ie closest to the sun. Put the number 9 where it should be in relation to the 12. Halfway between the two (where the hour hand would be if it was 10.30) is where North is. This method works regardless of what time it is. Of course when it is 12 midday the sun will be in the north because we are in the southern hemisphere, but in summer the sun is more overhead, so it can be a bit difficult to tell, just wait a couple of hours and try again.

Sunday 7th October

Well it certainly was cold last night, 2 degrees. Laura had my big thick tiger blanket as well as her sleeping bag. I had my 'hippy' blanket and -5 sleeping bag, Satoshi also had a warm blanket and sleeping bag in his tent. I hope he was warm enough. I know Laura and I only took off our shoes to get into bed. No rush this morning as the Pioneer Settlement doesn't open till 9.30. We were the very first to arrive. Admission for 2A1C \$81, but that included a one hour river cruise on the paddle steamer "Pyap". Considering we stayed all day, and were almost the last to leave, I'd say it was good value. Your admission is for 2 days, so there's no hurry. It's a big place with lots to see. If you've never been there, it is a re-creation of a town called "Horseshoe Bend", and is devoted to the river life and paddle steamers of yesteryear that carted passengers and freight up and down the 4 great rivers (and their tributaries) in this part of the country., being the Murray, Darling, Murrumbidgee and Edward. I would've thought the Wakool and Lachlan Rivers would've rated among the others, but they are just smaller rivers that feed into the Edward and Murrumbidgee. Paddle steamers like the 'Pyap' also towed barges, anything up to 3 at a time. A typical load would be a 'wool cut' from some of the big sheep stations along the rivers. 'Murray Downs' station for instance used to be 178,000 acres. Today it is only 11,000. Each barge could carry a load of 270 tonnes, that's about the equivalent of 10 modern semi-trailers, or 15 'bullock drays', and remember the steamers could tow 3 at a time, which made them very economical. At their peak, there were 200 boats working the rivers. The largest paddle steamer was "The Gem", which now sits in a small man-made lake at the entrance to the Settlement. She could once carry 52 passengers in private cabins, and a considerable crew. The Settlement is slowly restoring The Gem, but it will take many years. She has sat there awaiting restoration since my parents first took me there at the age of 14, 32 years ago. There are many things to see, many restored vehicles which are driven or demonstrated daily. Motor cars, motor cycles, tractors, steam rollers, traction engines and stationary engines, which powered everything before electricity came along. The main street is full of shops, full of merchandise from the period. There are authentic buildings that have been 're-located' from the surrounding districts, including a mudbrick kitchen which is my favourite. The last time I visited, there was an elderly woman named Jessie, who baked scones and damper in that mudbrick kitchen. She taught me to make damper. I still have her printed recipe at home. I'm told (as I asked), that she is still alive but well and truly retired. A large portrait of her hangs in the bakery. I think the highlight of today though was the 'photographers salon', where for \$3 a costume, you can dress up 'period style' and using your own camera, take as many photos as you like. Laura Satoshi and I did just that, and had the lady from the 'drapery shop' take the photos. After she went back to her shop, we 'dressed up' some more (meaning we 'cross-dressed'). Satoshi was splendid in a white wedding dress,

bonnet and flower posy, Laura was done up as a gentleman, and I had on a nice ankle length pink dress, matching bonnet, flower posy and baby. Like every lady should, I sat with my legs crossed (but I'd hitched the dress up to show my hairy legs and work boots). We then dressed Laura up in a very elegant matching skirt and jacket, hat and parasol. She said it felt like she was wearing a corset, she couldn't breathe. Of course many photos were taken. I've decided I will do a separate photo board of the Pioneer Settlement. We've just had tea, 2 minute noodles again, and the sun is setting taking the temperature down with it already.

Monday 8th October

About 1am I got up and wandered over to the 'loo'. It was another freezing night, perfectly clear skies and no wind. I had a chance to study the stars as I don't think I've ever seen them before. That first bright star I spoke of was no longer in the west, it was below the horizon. Risen in the east was the 'saucepan' constellation, and the 'milky way' was laying flat along the horizon from south to west. The most amazing thing I saw though, was the 'southern cross', it was very low to the horizon, absolutely dead south (I checked my compass), and completely upside down. Extending both lines through it, as I explained earlier, still pointed south as I expected, only this time it was to a point in space directly above it. I'd never seen it like that before. I also realized that the point in space the lines intersected at, was the rotation point of all the stars (I think), and that I was looking at the point in the sky that must be directly over the 'south pole' (?). I don't know for sure. I do know that I was looking at the same spot as I had earlier in the evening, as I had lined it up on a tree, and a certain height above it whilst sitting in a chair that was still out. I don't think photography of the night sky is possible with a digital camera (as far as I know), and I lacked the tripod and remote shutter release that I've used before, otherwise I would've taken a photo. It was so different, I'd like to learn more about astronomy. Len Beadell spent all his working life 'gazing' at the stars through his theodolite, thereby pin-pointing his exact position on the earth, as part of the Woomera and Maralinga projects, as well as the entire globe TRIG survey, to accurately measure the earth for rocket and satellite use in the 1950's.. I've just done the dishes (which we hadn't done for the last 2 days, pretty slack), which woke Laura up. Our talking has stirred Satoshi as well. Its now 8.10am. When I had my cereal for brekky earlier, the milk from the fridge was frozen. The fridge in our camper is 18 years old, so the technology has probably changed quite a bit. Our vintage type fridge works better with the more air circulation you can give it at the back, so I removed the useless louver panels replacing them with much larger wire mesh fitted with dust and waterproof panels whilst driving. Typically this type of fridge only manages to cool the fridge part about 10 degrees lower than the air temperature, which is why they struggle a bit in warmer weather. I don't know whether our particular fridge is more efficient with my modifications helping, but it certainly 'freezes down' well and stays frozen for several days without any operation. Of course, with the 30-40 degree temperatures we'd been having, only the freezer part was frozen as I had the thermostat cranked right up to maximum. Suddenly we experience near freezing air temperatures, and now everything in the fridge is frozen as well. Hence the milk is frozen, and I'm glad we don't have any more beer or soft drink in aluminium cans, as they too would have exploded. Corrugations do the same thing, they shake up the contents and rub the already thin aluminium cans together until they burst. Eggs are also delicate to carry, but not impossible. Potholes and corrugations are not friendly to them, but we use a safe method to pack them. Open the cardboard carton, remove all the eggs (and replace them with rocks. No only kidding). Place a layer of Gladwrap fairly taught over the bottom half of the carton, put the eggs back, place another layer of taught Gladwrap over them, close the lid and secure it with a couple of elastic bands. The Gladwrap acts as tiny shock absorbers. A curious 'side effect' happens though, the shells don't break, but the contents get perfectly scrambled within the shells, which is real handy if you like omelettes. There's this pigeon that's been hanging around us. I mean its that unafraid of humans that it actually tripped over my foot. This morning it was walking all over the camper roof, "tic, tic, tic etc" and 'squawking' its head off. I reckon it should be called a 'rusty pigeon', 'cause when it flies its wings squeak like it needs a good grease and oil change. A very slow start today, finally hit the

road at 9.15 with Satoshi driving, so I can continue rambling on with this bullshit, or as it would be said in Japanese, "osu usi k'so!" (man cow shit, near enough) Just down the road a bit is the town and huge Lake Boga, which is several kilometers wide and was the 'runway' for Catalina 'flying boats' during World War 2. I forget what their purpose was (we didn't stop to look this time), but there's still one plane on display and I think a small bunker museum. 10am refueled at Kerang 35ltrs \$49 \$1.389ltr. There must be something wrong with the fuel gauge or sender unit as it was showing 'empty', but only took 35 out of its 90ltr capacity. Something else to attribute to the corrugations. Fuel economy has finally picked up to 9km/ltr or 25mpg from 945km for 105ltrs, as we've had flat roads and tail winds. I'm impressed with Satoshi's driving and overtaking skill, considering he's never driven something that weighs 4 tonnes and doesn't exactly handle all that well. When I finally get around to typing all this up, two things will happen; (a) the computer will auto-correct my atrocious spelling, and (b) when I upload it into Satoshi's electronic translator thingy, he'll finally be able to understand what the hell I've been talking about. Up around this part of Victoria, the sport of 'tractor pulling' was born at the town of Quambatook. Each year at Easter, a tractor pull event is held at Quambatook, with competitors coming from all over Australia. There are pulling events for 4 categories of tractor; vintage, conventional, mini modified and the open modified class. I believe the only stipulation enforced in the modified classes is that they have tractor differentials, axles, wheels and tyres. Although I described these events comprehensively in my diary, I wont here. All I'll say is that they are very interesting to go and watch if you're into big horsepower motor sports. I went to one at Rushworth many years ago. The 'big boys' in the open class can have V8 engines like you'd find in top fuel drag cars, quadruple turbo chargers, superchargers, and multiple V8 engines coupled to one transmission. They throw huge 'rooster tails' of dirt when the power is poured on, belch flame from the open exhausts, and make a helluva lot of noise, so take ear muffs. 11.30 191km arrived Bendigo and I jumped into the drivers seat for the 200km to home. 2.05pm Mountain Gate BP servo 38ltrs \$50 \$1.319ltr 8.5km/ltr 2.15 home S/R 326480 total distance this trip 6,164km Today only 392km from Swan Hill in 5 hours. Its only 17 degrees, sunny but we're cold. None of us want to be home. Despite the problems we encountered, I'll mark this down as a successful trip. We all had a good time. When you embark on a big trip, you have to be flexible and realistic, not everything's going to go to plan. I'm already thinking about the next one. One final funny little story about Coober Pedy. The golf course is just dirt and rock, no grass, no trees, and because it is so hot up there, its not used much during the day. Coober Pedyans have invented 'night golf'. They wear miners lights on their heads, use 'glow in the dark' balls, and carry a small patch of synthetic grass with them. They must have a rule that allows you to pick up your ball, put down your bit of grass, and place the ball on it for your next shot. Apparently if you play during the day, you can expect to lose several balls amongst the rocks. Playing at night with the glow balls, they are visible for quite a distance. Finally to end this story, given the information I've included about all the Rest Areas, and if you didn't mind roughing it, (and not buy ice-creams every day), you could probably slash \$1000 off our trip cost. Having the time and freedom to wait out unfavourable head winds, would save you quite a bit of money on fuel as well, which is by far the biggest expense. Well, if you've read all this, I congratulate you, and I hope you found it interesting. Of course if you'd like more detail on anything I've written about, drop me a line at dawson55@bigpond.net.au Cheers