

Dingoes at Dawn

and the kindness of strangers

Words: Fiona Lohrbaecher Images: Juergen Lohrbaecher

Blame it on Geoff Mack. His song, *I've Been Everywhere, Man*, is one of our favourite driving songs. We've chalked up a visit to many of the places mentioned in the lyrics, but not, '...the dusty Oodnadatta Track'. An enticing mud map from the Pink Roadhouse at Oodnadatta whet our appetite for an adventure so, farewelling Coober Pedy, we struck out across the Moon Plain to Oodnadatta.

Driving through the imposing 'dog' fence, we entered a desolate no-man's land. Behind us lay the last outpost of civilisation, the rocky mound of Coober Pedy and its attendant white tepee-shaped mounds. Ahead, stretched the vast, flat expanse of the Moon Plain. This is a popular post-apocalyptic movie location and relics from movie sets, including the Mad Max series, add to Coober Pedy's junk-yard-on-the-moon look.

A thousand broken bottles glinting in the sun adds to the desolation of the Plain and, stopping to investigate, we find the 'glass'

is actually glittering slabs of transparent gypsum.

As we drive on the land becomes more bare and barren. An occasional green line advertises the presence of a creek bed where trees hug the water line refusing to venture further afield.

The intriguing shape of a derelict car looms up ahead. This is no burnt out wreck but a bright blue, wheel-less VW Beetle riddled with bullet holes and with Patsie's Car painted large on the bonnet. 'Who the heck was Patsie?' we wondered as we posed for photos.

The traveller is welcomed to Oodnadatta by a large sign boasting its status as 'Australia's Hottest and Driest Town.' Temperatures regularly top forty degrees Celsius in the summer and the Pink Roadhouse is a welcome oasis. Outside, oblivious to the heat, an Aboriginal man is singing and strumming on a two-stringed guitar. The monotonous thrum was a perfect accompaniment to his haunting, chanting song.





Clockwise from left:
So who was Patsie? A derelict car with a touch of mystery on the Moon Plain, SA. ❖ Scram! The paparazzi are here.

Inside the roadhouse, there's a general store, post office, restaurant and the best chips we've had since leaving Hobart (Hobart waterfront's Fish Frenzy has Australia's best chips, official).

We could have lingered there for hours sheltering from the heat and flies, but we wanted to find a good camping spot before dark. The mud map leads to a spot next to an old Ghan bridge. The place is green, beautiful and historically intriguing, but the flies are unbearable even with our fly veils on. We looked forward to the relief of dusk, but then the mosquitoes were even worse and we were forced to retreat into the camper.

To my list of the traveller's requirements for happiness: a full stomach and an empty bladder, I now add: no flies and no mosquitoes!

As we drifted into sleep the mournful howls of dingoes gave us a delightful creepy feeling. I awoke in the early hours to answer a call of nature and after settling back into bed heard the soft pad of a prowling dingo followed by the unmistakable sound of a dingo urinating. 'Ooops', I thought. 'Have I committed an unforgiveable faux pas by weeing on a dingo's territory? Is he marking his scent over mine?' I was very uncomfortable at the thought of how close I had been to a dingo without knowing it.

There were two conflicting signs we'd seen at Kings Canyon about what to do in the event of a dingo attack: 'Lie still and cover your head with your arms', advised one, while the other says, 'be prepared to defend yourself aggressively, you are fighting for your life!' Well, I wouldn't fancy my chances in a scrap with a dingo so I'd go for the play dead option.

Back in the camper, we peered through the window with a torch to see two dingoes watching us from a few metres away. A million mosquitoes were clinging to the mosquito netting, whining like an old shortwave radio.

For the next two hours we enjoyed a private wildlife show. As it grew lighter we could see there

were six dingoes all within spitting distance of the trailer. They stalked each other and rolled, gambolled and wrestled like playful puppies. They eyed Juergen warily as he stepped outside with his camera, but kept their distance.

Dingoes, I had read, live singly or in a nuclear family unit. Occasionally, small groups get together for a clan reunion. We were obviously the uninvited guests at this gathering and felt somewhat honoured. When the sun was high the group began to disperse; two going one way, two the other, as the rest trotted away into the bush and the show was over. Time for us to pack up and face the flies again.

We hadn't driven far when we saw a huge dust cloud up ahead. What looked like a car rally was zooming along the track. Intrigued, we went to investigate. The cars turned off to Algebuckina Bridge, so we followed and found ourselves in the middle of a Variety Bash.

Dozens of highly decorated cars were driving, with disadvantaged kids, off-road from Melbourne to Uluru in eight days. This was day six of their trip. Most of the cars were two-wheel-drives and one was bogged in sand when we arrived. Juergen helped some 'pirates' pull it free. Under the bridge, the kids bashed a piñata and enjoyed barbecued snags before racing on to the next stop.

Forty kilometres short of the next settlement, William Creek, a tell-tale flapping noise alerted us to a flat tyre. When the wheel was removed three wheel nuts fell off! Hmmm -- all we could do was put the spare wheel on and pray. We drove off very, very slowly. We went a hundred metres and the driver's side of the car thumped into the dirt as the wheel and car parted company.

The sensible traveller installs a UHF radio with their frequency in large letters on the back of their caravan. We had considered getting a radio, we really did, but thinking was as far as we got. Of course there was no mobile phone signal so we could only wait for someone to come by.



Clockwise from left:

Gazing down the years: sunset over an old section of the Ghan.
 ❖ Camping on the Oodnadatta Track. ❖ Old Ghan Bridge on the Oodnadatta Track. ❖ What are you looking at? Face to face with a dingo on the Oodnadatta Track

It was 38 degrees. Our 1989 LandCruiser has no air conditioning, which is no problem when we are driving as the open windows and sunroof let in a cooling breeze, but when we're not moving they also let in the flies and soon the car was as full of flies as a dung heap.

We'd just finished putting up the camper for shade and respite from the flies when the first kind strangers, a retired couple from Sydney, arrived in a campervan. They were heading for Oodnadatta, but as 30 km/h is the most their camper could manage on the gravel road they wouldn't arrive until the next day.

We gave them a note to deliver to the Pink Roadhouse, but they were reluctant to leave us stranded. Then, the second kind strangers arrive; four young people from Melbourne in a four-wheel-drive. They were also headed for Oodnadatta, but offered to return to William Creek to get help. We gratefully accepted their offer and gave them a note to deliver to the hotel. Reassured, the kind Sydney folks rumbled away.

An hour later our messengers returned with the news that help was close behind. We offered them money for fuel. 'Do you have any diesel?' they asked. We did and, as Juergen emptied a can into their fuel tank, he casually said, 'You said unleaded, right?' The driver swore and turned white! We quickly assured him of the joke, but he obviously didn't see the funny side, although his girlfriend was splitting her sides laughing. She gave our kids some chocolate Easter bunnies, which were gleefully gobbled up before they melted in the outback heat.

A dust cloud heralded the arrival of the rescue party; Noel and Ngaire from the William Creek

Hotel. Their mission: to rescue the children from the heat. The kids and I went back to the hotel with Ngaire while Juergen packed up the trailer. Noel towed the trailer to William Creek, but the car had to stay put until the next day.

William Creek (population 4) boasts a hotel, a scenic flight service and that's it. It also has Australia's most expensive petrol – at least it was the dearest we'd come across at \$2.20/litre for diesel. The hotel has a small bar decorated with hundreds of business cards and a very large dining room from which an appetising smell wafted. We envisaged ourselves stranded at the campground behind the hotel for the next couple of weeks while the car was being fixed in Coober Pedy.

Early the next morning, Noel and a mate headed out to our car in a ute. There was no room to take Juergen and he spent the waiting time pacing up and down anxiously like an expectant father. After breakfast the kids and I strolled across the road to look at the memorial park where an impressive collection of space debris from the former Woomera Rocket Range is displayed.

We were investigating the old missiles when Juergen strolled over to tell us the car was back, fixed and ready to go! Apparently, Noel replaced the wheel nuts with some spares he had and, while they weren't a perfect fit, they would do until we could get them changed. We can't believe it – we thought we'd have to pay for a breakdown truck to take the car 160 kilometres back to Coober Pedy and wait for it to be fixed. Now, there we were back on the road again with just a few hours' delay. Yippee!

Our good fortune didn't come cheap. Juergen wryly reckoned the wheel nuts must be made of gold but, to be fair, we were in the middle of nowhere, Noel dropped everything to deal with our problem, and he got us on the road straight away! Intensely grateful, we head off again with a song in our hearts and some familiar lyrics on our lips: 'We've been everywhere, man!' ❖

Meet the Lohrbacher family

Fiona: mum, writer, artist and home educator.

Juergen: dad, registered nurse and keen runner.

Amber (14): lover of everything Japanese and budding manga artist.

Ahren (10): maths whiz and Pokemon nut.

Mia (5): unicorn, fairy and Nanny Piggins fan.

We love to travel. Our latest adventure was two years travelling around Australia before returning to Tasmania where we now live in a co-housing community. Fiona enjoys the opportunity to regularly cook for 30 people and the children love having friends around 24/7.

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