

FROM GULF TO GULF and in between.

A hasty trip through the Centre 24 Sept to 16 October 2003

We left Gunnedah early in the morning on Wednesday 24 September, having recovered from my 80th birthday party and our doctors' visits. We would take it easy, we had said – though we only had 3 weeks to make a round trip through the Centre and Alice Springs. After 673 km we reached our “freebee” (A rest area where you are allowed to camp for free) in Mitchell, Queensland. To our surprise we did not only get a free *power* site but an *ensuite* as well, in a beautifully landscaped area! I asked the manager whether there were apparent benefits from Council's policy to give visitors to the town 2 nights free camping with all facilities. He replied that the hot spa baths, next to the park, were much more used and that the town's businesses were doing well, with most tourists utilising the day by visiting other promoted attractions in the area and spending their money by shopping/eating in town. As we had done just that during our first stay in Mitchell some years ago, we moved on the following day.

25 September.

I still had my watch and caravan clock on summertime – and we decided to stick to that. As a result we went early to bed and were gone before other campers woke up. At our first pit stop I found the traditional green frog jumping out from under the bowl ring of the toilet when I flushed it... and when we read the road signs: “Road trains 53.5 meters long” and saw the familiar termite hills appear on the plains, we knew that we had arrived in the “Never Never” - and were in for the long straight road. Those termite hills (sometimes reaching more than a man's height) look like tombstones – or fairy villages... depending on the mood you're in. Though you have to keep your eyes open and stay alert to avoid kangaroos and other native animals, the steady zoom of the car engine and the monotony of the landscape conspire to make you drowsy. No wonder that in Queensland there are signs asking: “passenger, is your driver alert?”

Rien had been driving for a while when I looked at him and saw his eyelids drop. “Are you OK?” I asked. “Yeh” But a few minutes later he drove to the wrong side of the road. “Look out!” I yelled. It was time to change drivers. Most highways have “Driver Reviver” stations, manned by volunteers and open at the weekends and during holidays. There you can pull up and get a free cup of coffee, tea or a cool drink and a few bikkies. But as we mainly travel on *country* roads we carry a picnic basket with the same items.

We stopped for petrol. Though petrol is cheaper in Queensland, in the isolated areas in the west you pay a lot more. This time just over a dollar per litre. We had *crumbed fish* and *battered chips* in Blackall. Very nice! We reached our next freebee well before dark and were the first campers in this large roadside rest area. After travelling 760 km we still had the good sense to put our caravan up on the high side just off the road, recalling our earlier experience when we camped in this same camping area south of Winton. (In 1998, when our caravan was still new and you could look through the “bubbles”, we camped there near the creek. We woke up to heavy rain and were well and truly bogged. Most caravans had to be towed away next morning, but with our Subaru Liberty in torque, Rien was able to drag us to safety after I had surveyed the route on sore bare feet... The whole caravan, still “up” at the time, was covered in mud. I should have taken a photo of it, but was too upset!)

During the night we heard (correction: I heard – Rien always sleeps like a log!) several vehicles pull up, one rather close by. When I got up to visit the amenities - I

heard loud animal screams. Looking around I noticed two tall slender birds standing on a knob, stretching their necks. Our neighbours were asleep in their swags, but one man was up, boiling the billy on the campfire. I asked him whether he knew what kind of birds those screamers were. He answered in a rather educated voice not befitting the truck next to him, that he did not know for sure but thought they were Brolgas. I then recognised them as we had seen a family of Brolgas near the Gulf of Carpentaria some years back. But I had never *heard* them before. I told him so, whereupon he enquired whether his load had disturbed us during the night. I looked at him and then at the truck: he was carrying **camels!** He was bringing them from the Northern Territory to the NSW coast for beach camel rides!

26 September.

We did not take a shower in the freebee (a bit wary of those), but noticed that the BP station in Winton had free showers for travellers. Something to remember! We travelled through the same desolate landscape to Cloncurry, the "Gateway to the Gulf". This time we did not turn off to Normanton like a few years before when we visited the Gulf of Carpentaria again out of nostalgia... I had been so keen to see in what body of water Willem Jantz had sailed "Het Duifken", the first Dutch ship to land in Australia in 1606... only to find the second time, that tourism had ruined the unique historic atmosphere. Now we went on until we reached the more interesting area around Mount Isa, the Copper City. Though the petrol was cheap in this mining town (85.6 cents per litre), the caravan park had put up its price to \$19 per night for an ensuite. We had "only" travelled 532 km that day, so I felt fit enough to do some washing in the hand basin of the ensuite. It was still so hot that everything was dry before we turned in. I hate the smell of dirty clothes. Some long term tourists put a drum with soapy water and dirty washing in the caravan when travelling – the bumpy road does the job! But I have never been game to try this.

27 September.

An early start brought us to Camooweal on the border of Queensland and the Northern Territory in time for a morning coffee break, which we needed after the shocking discovery that we had to pay 112.9 cents per litre for our petrol. Which was cheaper than at our next stop: Barkley Homestead, where the price was 117.5 cents. Well, they can ask anything they like: there is no other Service Station for hundreds of miles around.

After 662 km we reached Tennant Creek, an old goldmining town on the Overland Telegraph Line, constructed in 1872. The place is a reminder of the gold rush days and tours are conducted through the now worked out mines. I had heard of "The Devils' Pebbles" in the area and when we saw the sign on the Stuart Highway indicating "Bush Camping", we decided to go there and take a day off for sight seeing. The bush camping place was some 12 km out of town and turned out to be a horse-riding centre called Juno. When we arrived we saw a whole busload of Eastern Europeans camped in Juno's permanent tent village. We got ourselves a nice possie in the bush, away from the bus. When I went into the amenities shed, there were a few Russian or Estonian girls, pointing in fright at a large insect. "What is it?" they asked me. I looked at it. "A grasshopper" I replied, thinking they did not know the English name for it. But "We do not have things like that in our country", they wailed. Well, I still remember calling the first large lizard I saw "A Beast" – so I understood their consternation.

We really needed a rest from driving, so decided to sleep in and spend the next day exploring the town and its surroundings. The day turned out to be another scorcher, but we were determined to walk through "The Pebbles" and find a small one to take home. I took the first photos of the trip.

We visited the Mining Museum at the back of the elaborate Visitors Centre, and received a "Miners' Right" replica as a receipt for the \$2 per person entrance fee! The mineral collection within the complex was the best we had ever seen. We discovered that this was a private collection donated to the Tennant Creek Museum on condition that it would be properly housed. The precious offer was accepted and a special building was erected and fitted out to show at their best advantage the most beautiful and rare specimens found in Australia and abroad. The display was truly breathtaking.

29 September

On the road again on our way to "the Alice" (popular name for Alice Springs). We stopped at "The Devil's Marbles" which are much bigger than The Pebbles - and certainly better known. There is even a camping ground, operating on the "honesty system", but we found it to be rather bare and open, a disadvantage, as the weather was turning cooler. We parked and walked the special trail around the huge round boulders, some of which had split in half because of weathering. I took two more photos so we can compare the pebbles with the marbles when we are home.

We met a family travelling in an old bus, converted into a mobile home. They turned out to be nut farmers and carried kilo bags of macadamia nuts with them to sell and cover the cost of the extended holiday. During the trip, the children continued their education via the Correspondence School (like Robert did when he went with Marina and Allen on the yearlong tour around Australia). I talked to the mother about the benefits children have from travelling *and* learning, citing Robert as an example, because - though he hated ordinary school -, he managed to become dux of year 6 in his Correspondence Class. That news pricked up the ears of the young travellers - and when I added that our daughter admitted that she had also learned a lot from teaching her son, the mother agreed. "But the kids have to call me *Miss* when we work through the lessons, because *then* I am not the mother, but the teacher"

We bought a kilo nuts for \$3 (quite cheap!) and were given a demo how to crack them by putting each nut in a hole of the standard rubber doormat and then go to work on them with a hammer.

We always meet interesting people when we are travelling. A lot more Australians want to see their own country now, especially after retirement, when they become "Grey Nomads" and we feel part of that tribe! In Western Australia we were once called "Recycled Teenagers" - and I like that expression even better! Of all foreign travellers, most are German - some of whom we can understand if we strain our ears and brains. Funny: we can almost understand that language better than the Dutch of our ex patriots.

After an eventful day we finally reached Alice Springs where we took a powered site for a week (\$140,00). Caravan parks will one day outprice themselves. But my mobile worked, so we could reach our kids. Next day Rien erected our gigantic antenna. This time, as we did not take the boat, we carried our bigger B/W TV (56 cm) and were looking forward to *seeing* the news. Spot on: clear picture and good sound! I should have been satisfied, but curiosity got the better of me. "Try it without the antenna" I suggested.

Would you believe: it worked almost as well. We took it in our stride... only because we are much more good-humoured when we are "on the road". We were too tired to do much more than having a look at the town and went to bed early.

1 October

We decided not to travel too far from town but re-visit some of the places we had seen when we were last in Alice with our new Ford in 1987. We saw the monument to John Flynn, the "flying Doctor" – and went on to Simpson's Gap. We did not see any wildflowers on the way, which surprised as well as disappointed us, as the wildflower display we so much enjoyed on our previous trip at this time of year, was one of the reasons we went!

We were told that in Alice Springs too, "the worst drought since Federation" had played havoc with the already struggling vegetation. Most waterholes were dry. In the afternoon we visited the Pioneer Women of Australia Museum. We met with the Curator who informed us that Val Mitchell, the Hon. Secretary with whom I'd been corresponding since my induction, had been staying home lately as she suffered from severe arthritis. Pauline also told us, that there was no place to "hang" me – until the Society was successful in acquiring larger premises. We were stunned by the exhibition of portraits of women who were FIRST in their field. To mention a few achievements: First female commercial helicopter pilot; first woman to win 5 surfing titles; first woman Senior Lecturer in Psychology and then of course Nancy Bird, who at age 19 was not only the first but also the youngest female commercial pilot in the British Empire at that time (1935). If this aroused your interest, here are a few more. How about the first woman governor of a maximum-security men's prison? And the first woman Judge to the High Court in Canberra, the highest court in the Australian judicial system? No wonder I feel not really worthy to be included in that illustrious company. I've done a few things one could call "done for the first time", but I think I better start rowing training so I can be the first fast rower in my age group.

1 October

We visited Val Mitchell at her home. She was everything I thought she would be! I felt at home with her immediately as soon as I put the face to her writing. I took a quick photo of her sitting opposite me at the table. After chatting for a while, her husband Bob took a photo of the two of us with a digital camera so we could take the photos with us. We then left and went to Emily Gap, where I took a photo of unusual rock engravings. We will have to compare the photos taken on this trip with the ones I shot in 1986 – it somehow looked different from what I remembered. It could be the lack of water in the waterholes.

3 October

We visited the home of Mien and Fred Blom. Mien has written a book about her youth in Holland on the farm, and another book describing her experiences when, after migrating from Holland with her husband and six children, the family tried to settle down in Alice Springs. Fred Blom has an interesting hobby: he designs and completely fabricates Dutch barrel organs! He showed us his growing collection. The first one he made was a fair sized miniature organ that really produces the typical street organ sound, though not – he admits - of the best quality. The second organ looked and sounded more authentic. It's mounted on an undercarriage and he takes this masterpiece to the schools to demonstrate. Fred put on his Dutch cap and turned the wheel to produce the "chicken song", the kids' favourite piece. He showed us how

he makes the pipes and even the “rolls”. As he is also a meritorious artist, he has decorated the organs with authentic Dutch landscapes and flowers. After showing and playing his third and biggest organ (almost real size) he let Rien have a go at turning the wheel! I bought Mien’s books, which she autographed: “from Mien to Mientje”. It’s always funny to meet a namesake, but more so if your name is not common (in Australia).

That afternoon we went to Corroboree Rock that looked like a big wedge with two holes in it. We walked around it and I took a photo side on.

4 October

We drove to Ellery Creek with its permanent waterhole flanked by ribbed rocks. It seemed to be a popular picnic spot and several people were swimming in the hole (See photos) Later in the afternoon we followed the signs to the “Ochre Pits”. We had not seen those before and were astounded by the sight of what seemed to be a waterfall of autumn colours. Here the aborigines used to scrape the rocks to obtain ochre powder in shades of yellow to deep brown, that they made into a paste for body painting.

Sometimes when we travel through this central Australia landscape and I look in the rear view mirror, it looks as if we are driving out of a framed, beautiful painting.

5 October

Sunday! We went to the Church of the Ascension, a beautiful building befitting the High Church Service. We were welcomed in a most cordial manner and wrote our names in the Visitors Book. We did a “mainie” (common name for driving or walking up and down the main street), trying to find MacDonald’s. We were so unsuccessful and became so hungry that Rien decided to ask directions from passers by – but it seemed that everyone he asked was a visitor like us. In desperation he approached a group of Aboriginal girls, thinking that *they* would surely know. But they first wanted “dollars” – and *then* they would point him in the right direction. He went back to the car. Somehow we all of a sudden found the place! We each had a Big Mac, followed by three soft serves in three different varieties: vanilla, chocolate and swirl. I had a whole one and two bottoms; Rien had two tops. It was so nice that we repeated the procedure.

6 October

We left Alice Springs early in the morning hoping to reach Coober Pedy before dark, taking turns at the wheel during this 699 km journey through sleep inducing country. We had to pay 112.9 and 113.9 cents per litre for our petrol. (Remember: the cheapest petrol was in Mount Isa: 85.6!) But we succeeded in our effort and reached the caravan park where we were charged \$19 for an unpowered site for the night. A German tourist, who also booked in, was given a discount because he was a senior. I was not too tired to get hot under the collar and ask for a *Senior Citizen* discount – which we got, so we also paid \$17.10!

7 October

Hit the road again for yet another gruelling trip through the Never Never. At least the landscape was a bit different, featuring several salt lakes. I took a photo of Lake Hart near Woomera. We decided to divert and visit Woomera, the former Rocket Range.

As a settlement it has lost its importance, but it still has a Visitors Centre (where I left the Gunnedah Brochures, as in all other Centres in the places we travelled through or stayed) and a very interesting Open Air Museum with a rocket display. I had to take a shot myself! At the back of the display I noticed a fenced-in area that houses “the wreckage of the first satellite launched here in 1968, making Australia the *fourth* Nation to successfully launch a rocket after UUSR, France and the USA” The wreckage was found in the Simpson Desert in 1998.

659 km from the Alice, we finally reached Port Pirie, where we paid \$17.50 for a powered site. From the heat in the north and the centre, where the nights were too hot to sleep under a blanket, we now had to put our jumpers on and snuggle up in our sleeping bags at night.

8 October

On this day in 1573, the burghers in my birthplace Alkmaar (Holland) defeated the Spanish Army that had beleaguered the City for months. No white bread and cheese for us (that’s how the victory was celebrated back then), but fish and chips on the pier in Wallaroo on the Spencer Gulf. We had decided to have a day of sight seeing. We left the caravan behind and embarked on a round trip: Port Broughton – Wallaroo – Kadina – Port Wakefield – Snowtown – Crystal Brook – Port Pirie...over very scenic roads. Without the caravan obstructing the view, the back window again became a picture frame when looking in the rear view mirror.

Throughout our travels the names of creeks and bridges have fired my imagination. “Dead man’s Creek”... and I can see a young farm boy running back home, shouting “there’s a dead man face down in the creek!” – the family going there to verify, but nobody knows who the man is. From then on the creek is referred to as “Dead man’s Creek”. “Piano Creek” – I could easily write a story about that. “Tar Boy Creek”, “Peach Tree Gully”... and so on. But on *this* trip we crossed “The Three Sisters” bridge over “Potato Creek”... I wonder what story lies behind that one!

9 October

On our way to Port Vincent, I stopped recording distances and only made notes of “freebees” for the way back. The hills we were travelling through were so vividly coloured that it hurt the eye. This is a canola growing area and the luminous yellow now competed with the deep purple fields of Patterson’s Curse that grew in abundance after the drought. White sheep dotted the green paddocks in between. We had never seen anything so colourful like this before!

We reached Port Vincent and pay \$20 for the privilege of parking our outfit for the night.

10 October

We left as early as possible after breakfast. It makes it a lot easier when you don’t have to hitch up and we managed to hit the road at half past seven, which was really half past six. We were now in the foot of the boot that is York Peninsula and stopped in a place called “Troubridge Hill”, taking time off to visit the Aquatic Reserve, the resting place of the Clan Ranald wreck. I took a photo of the enormous anchor, the only thing that could be salvaged.

We reached our destination in time to gather all information on Innes National Park, where we wanted to stay two nights to explore the “toe” of the foot, to find out whether this is the area we want to go to on our next trip. There were not many

campers so we could pick our spot. The roads and camping sites glittered in the late sunlight. We picked up a few pieces of white rock and upon closer examination discovered that the glittering material was crushed *mica*! We added a bagful of specimens to our collection of stones gathered on the way.

11 October

The weather had turned freezing cold, probably because of the strong wind blowing in from the Investigator Strait off the Southern Ocean. We were only investigating, so we picked a few spots to visit, leaving the rest till we come back in the summer. “The Gap” is a tourist “must see” and we decided to go on the short boardwalk where we were literally swayed by the wind, having to hang on to the chain rail. Rien did not want to go around the bend to the lookout on the Gap, but seeing my determination, he followed (I think to hold on to me). I could not take a photo of the Gap itself, which was under us – but tried to capture the rugged coastline. From there we went to spot Ethel Wreck, buried in the beach sand, where I took two more shots. The whole coast here is littered with shipwrecks. No wonder! It’s an awesome sea that batters the rocky outcrops. We had an early night, snuggling in our sleeping bags before we freeze (no power! No heater!). I left my “beanie” (woollen cap) on, pulling it right down over my face because my nose was so cold. When I woke up, I saw a very blurry caravan interior. Before I could think “there’s something wrong with my eyes”, I realised I was looking through the knitted rows of my beanie.

11 October

We made the most of the morning hours and visited the Corny Light House. There were some wildflowers growing in the salty sea breeze, which I tried to capture on film.

We rather enjoyed the long day of travelling through canola fields contrasted by Patterson’s Curse (it’s a curse because it kills cattle that eat it, but it’s also known as “Salvation Jane” as it is a boon for bee keepers). We spotted an old church complete with graveyard between Balaclava and Riverton. I had to make a photo – though the camera does not always capture the image of first sight.

We found a freebee and camped on the bushy side of the sportsground in Narooka.

12 October

I often feel a kind of sadness when we are on our way home, though I know that I will be quite happy once we are back. I even look forward to do the washing in the *washing machine* and clean up the caravan to make it ready for the next trip!

It was no help that the shoulders of the roads in South Australia feature “accident markers”: a red post indicates injured accident victims and black posts mark fatalities. Every driver slows down at these spots, like when seeing a police car or an accident. But that reaction never lasts long!

We reached Broken Hill fairly early after a gruelling trip. Especially Rien felt that we were overdoing it a bit as his back started to play up.

13 October

We planned to stay two nights in Broken Hill, so we could visit “The living desert sculptures” as we had seen some intriguing photos in a brochure. We went to the Information Centre and discovered that disabled visitors could obtain a key that would unlock the gate to the large fenced-in area, enabling them to drive up the hill to the sculpture site. The “Invalid Car park card” I have because of my crooked leg, has

become even more valuable during our latest trips. In this case the 20 mins walk uphill would have been impossible for both of us as we were feeling the strain of constant long travel. We gratefully paid the \$10 deposit, took the key and travelled the 11 km out of town to The Living Desert Reserve picnic area where everyone else has to park the car – but *we* opened the gate and drove through. Still children at heart, we derived great pleasure out of that privilege!

The concept of this sculpture exhibition on top of a hill that overlooks the city of Broken Hill - is brilliant. Sculptors from all over the world made their contribution to the Sculpture Symposium held here in 1993. I took three photos including a close-up of the one I liked best: "Mother and Child".

14 October

We faced the long haul to Cobar where we wanted to stay for two nights so we could see "the kids". We always refer to Marina's children as "the kids" because 30 years ago we were young grandparents and regarded them as our own! They call us GD and GM so the great grandchildren can call us Granddad and Grandma. We absolutely detest "Nan and Pop": that really sounds foreign in *our* ears! Though the kids were working and the great grand kids were in school, we had a great time. It was good to see them again!

15 October

We celebrated the 30th birthday of Marina's eldest daughter Nicole by going to Cobar's Bowling Club restaurant and having dinner together. Michelle (daughter number two) brought her baby and Rien's namesake: Oscar Marinus aged 2. Nicole's children Kaela (13), James (10) and Samuel (7) were there, as well as "Uncle" Robert, Marina's son, aged 19. Though tired, we enjoyed the company.

16 October

Rien's back pain got worse and we had to share the work he usually does on his own – like lifting the caravan onto the towbar ball. He insisted on driving the first 100 kms. Turning out of the caravan park onto the Barrier Highway, all seemed well until we heard an enormous bang and a screeching, ground scraping sound. Rien tried the brakes, but apparently the connection to the caravan brakes had come apart when the caravan had slipped off the ball. When we finally came to a standstill and clambered out, we saw that the caravan's steel V beams had been pushed *under* the car. Disaster at the last leg of the trip! We stood there, looking in dismay at the coupling. I had already decided to call the NRMA, when suddenly three burly semitrailer drivers came to the rescue. They ordered me back in the car and told me to drive about two feet forward while they lifted the car. Easy! They then reconnected the van. It did not even take a minute. We could not believe our luck! But then, when we are travelling we always find helpful people – or rather they find *us*! Out on the road, Australia is again the country we found in 1950 with "mateship" meaning helping each other no matter what: something we had never experienced before we came here. In the big cities this mateship is now a rarity, probably because of multiculturalism overtaking the true Australian character. Country towns are still the same, thank goodness! We wanted to be home before Marina had to be back at work. We almost made it: home at 10 past 2!

We had travelled 8000 km in 3 weeks... and promised each other never to do that again. One day we must try and act like octogenarians.