

Buffalo Safaris – The Early Years

It is early 1995 and Kim and I are heading north from Victoria our 4WD is stocked with supplies and towing a trailer with our trail bikes and more supplies – we like to camp in comfort!

We are to catch up with Kim's good friend Owen Davies, who has joined the partnership, and spend a week or two looking at a destocked and desolate cattle station located in the Gulf country of Northern Queensland. Owen has a 50,000 acre sheep station in marginal country in the Darling Downs of Queensland which has been in the grip of a drought for several years and as such is 'revenue negative' in polite conversation.

Sheep station is the Australian name for a large ranch running sheep, the station owner is called a grazier. Cattle stations run cattle rather than sheep. Most stations are natural rangeland with little or no improvements other than rudimentary fencing of paddocks that, in themselves may occupy 20,000 acres or more. Most are held as perpetual pastoral leases from the government rather than freehold land. As such the government restricts the principal activities carried out on them to grazing livestock. Many are larger than small countries. The largest in Australia covers over 10,000,000 acres.

Owen is not adverse to trying his hand at any venture and has obtained some Opal mining claims at Lightning Ridge in Northern New South Wales where he is finding some 'colour' the term used for opal.

The mining has generated enough cash for Owen and his wife Ruth to purchase the rundown roadside store at Hebal, about 50 kilometres north of Lightning Ridge.

Wikipedia describes Hebel as:

'A hamlet in Balonne Shire, in South West Queensland, Australia. It is situated 4 kilometres north of the border with New South Wales on the Castlereagh Highway. At the 2006 census, Hebel and the surrounding area had a population of 149.'

Whilst technically correct this description cannot conjure the utter desolation and dereliction that is Hebal.

Hebal was originally a Customs post in the 1800's before the then 6 separate colonies of Australia federated into the single country we have today. Presumably taxes were collected from merchants travelling from New South Wales. Whether the customs post came first or the dilapidated Inn is a moot point. However the pub is still operating which indicates how soul destroying and physically draining it is to drive across the dry, flat plains of inland Australia, let alone live there.

There are only 8 or 10 adults living within a mile of the pub and the exterior is as inviting as a mortuary but of an evening it does a strong trade as it acts like a magnet to draw the widely dispersed population together for a few hours of snatched socialization.

Across from the pub stands Owen's store, a dilapidated shack with flaking paint when he bought it. A year later it still looks like a strong gust of wind will blow it over but a coat of paint and some renovations has refreshed it and trade has improved significantly.

We briefly sample the delights of the Hebel Pub then early next morning head off with Owen on the final 2000 kilometres to our destination – Rungulla Station.

Rungulla is owned by a Texan, who happens to also own a property next door to Owen in the south, hence our connection. It is described as a 'rough block' in local parlance.

The ranch is around 150,000 acres of virgin bush intersected by the Gilbert river. It is a mosaic of broken river gorges and rocky ridges with precious little undulating soft ground. It is no surprise that at a time of low beef prices it lies destocked and derelict.

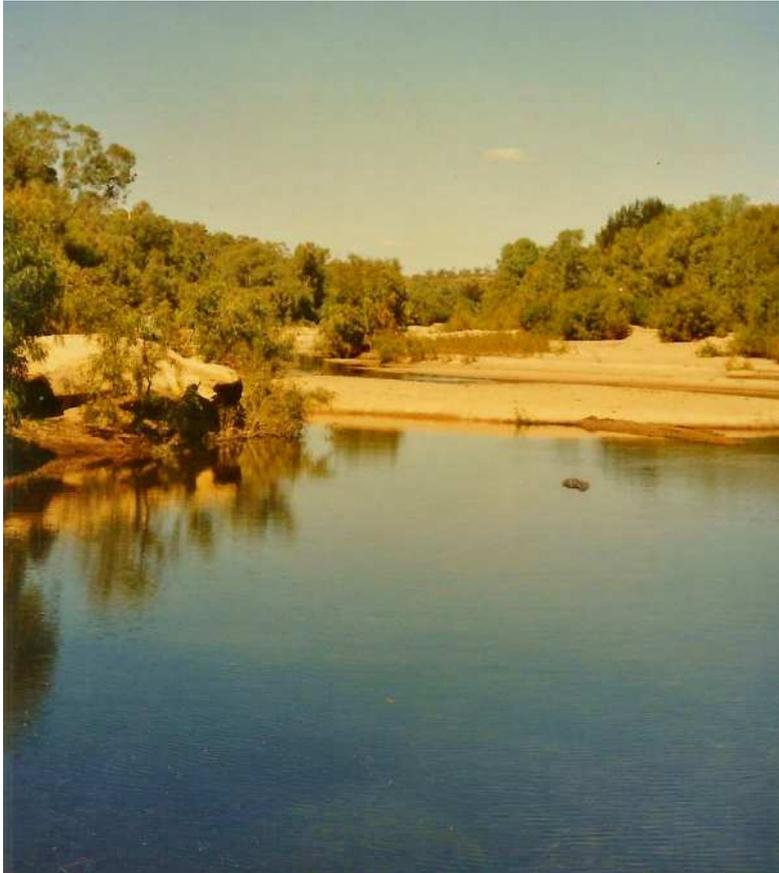
At the end of the track into the holding and situated, on the largest area of relatively flat ground, what passes for a homestead. The building is just an earth floored shed clad in corrugated tin sheets, no lining. The shed is semi open to the elements on one side.

Internally there is one partition wall. Behind the wall is a rusting iron framed bed with a grubby rotting innerspring mattress alongside it is an antique wooden dresser. Upon the dresser lies an assortment of ageing, thumbled Playboy magazine's dating from about 10 years previously. Some filthy wooden benches, topped with a few rusting opened cans that once contained baked beans or corned beef along with an old, defunct, kerosene powered refrigerator, dating from the 1950's comprise the kitchen.

In a separate shed alongside it there is an ancient, diesel powered, Lister generator. A 100ft high Radio Telephone tower stands forlornly about 50 meters away. Decorating the entire scene is a collection of several hundred empty brown beer bottles peppered with a similar number of clear liquor bottles with tattered, ageing, Bundaberg Rum labels still clinging forlornly to a few. .

All in all it is difficult to imagine a more depressing abode - we waste no time looking for a more agreeable campsite well away from it.

A couple of miles down a rough track we have located a suitable, shaded camping spot adjacent to a waterhole on the Gilbert River.



Water hole on the Gilbert River.

The following afternoon Owen announces his intention to visit the property next door to let the owners know we are here. Readers unfamiliar with life in rural areas, particularly sparsely inhabited rural areas, may be unaware that any movement of vehicles on unsealed roads leaves tyre tracks. Unfamiliar tread patterns and tracks going into a property known to be uninhabited will arouse suspicion.

The accepted custom is to notify people likely to see your activity to alleviate any concerns. I ask Owen to invite them over for a dinner in a few day's time so we can find out a bit of the local history and what goes on in this part of the world.

Owen returns to advise the Eddie, a middle aged man whose father was one of the first white settlers in the area, his wife Clementine, about 10 years younger and Bethany, their 12 YO daughter, will be over the day after tomorrow.

The next few days pass in a blur of activity as we cover a lot of ground cross country on the trail bikes as well as hiking around the river. A lot of this time is spent high on the ridges searching for signs of aboriginal occupation. We enjoy considerable success in this quest, uncovering numerous sites of rock art in sheltered overhangs. In addition to the ubiquitous hand prints (made by mixing ochre with saliva in the mouth then spitting around the

outstretched hand) there are a number of sites with crocodiles depicted. Obviously the reptile was the totem of the local people. This is hardly surprising as the Gilbert River, whilst not flowing at this late stage of the dry season, has a large number of deep, clear waterholes populated by numerous, fresh water crocodiles. What does surprise us is that many of these crocodile paintings have been painted over with rough depictions of a kangaroo or wallaby. Thursday duly arrives and we decide upon roast lamb and vegetables followed by a baked pineapple upside down cake for dinner with our guests.

Everything is bubbling along well when they arrive. Owen is enjoying a beer, whilst Kim and I are sharing a bottle of sparkling wine. Our guests decline any alcoholic beverages. However Eddie's eyes pass longing over the chilled can in Owen's hand.

During the course of the evening we find that Eddie used to be a bit of a wild boy in the past who was not adverse to drinking himself senseless on a regular basis.

Around 15 years ago the local school at Forsyth recruited a young Canadian teacher, Clementine, Eddie was smitten. However Clementine is a strict Baptist and the price of love was abstinence, Eddie takes the pledge and they are married. The evening progresses well and we are discussing what happened to the local indigenous population. They are now housed in Government built communities closer to the coast. We ask about the kangaroos painted over crocodiles and receive the following response.

'This is a pretty rough area, not the best country for cattle, it was opened up for settlement quite late –around the 1920's. After the 2nd world war, about 1950, I was only a young boy at the time I can well remember there was considerable trouble with the locals who were killing cattle. My father told me the station owners got together and one of them went down south to New South Wales and recruited about a dozen young, fit, blacks and brought them back up here.

They provided them with Winchester 92s and plenty of 44-40 ammo and sent them to track down the troublemakers and sort them out. They would have been the ones who painted their totem over the crocs. When the job was done they went back south with their reward'.

Silence greeted this intelligence for some long seconds until Eddie followed up. 'I don't know what you're thinking but remember there was no such thing as a black nation, just individual tribal groups, before the political correctness of big city progressives rewrote history.

Blacks were quite happy to kill other blacks and often did. Indeed in 1950 plenty of blacks were being killed by whites with impunity in the southern states of the USA and at this present moment Mugabe is murdering Matabele by the thousand in Zimbabwe.'

Not long after this pronouncement the evening ended with Eddie and Clementine insisting we come over three days later for them to return the dinner treat.

We spent the next few days confirming what was reasonably obvious already, there were insufficient pigs and wild cattle on this property to provide for hunting holidays.

The appointed evening duly arrived and, after a few pre dinner drinks we drove the 15 km to our neighbor's homestead. The best thing that could be said about Eddie's home was it was better than Rungulla.

The modest house was constructed of masonry blocks with an overhanging roof forming a mini verandah around its perimeter. None of the windows were glazed but crude protective insect screens adorned them along with a screen door.

The garden was non-existent just bare earth under some motley shrubs at this point in the dry season. That bare earth had been overrun and picked over by a flock of peahens and a couple of peacocks. I recall passing the comment that they must be fit and ever alert to escape the local dingo population. Inside it was sparsely, but adequately, furnished. The main point of interest was a baby grand piano. This was a real battler's home. Along with our group there was also a telecommunications technician sent out to rectify a fault with their service in attendance.

Eddie opened up with the comment: 'We were so impressed with your delicious offerings that we thought we would do something special and roast a couple of the peacocks.'

Having eaten Guinea Fowl in Africa – I will rephrase that – having tried to eat Guinea fowl in Africa I had visions of overcooked, stringy birds that would require considerable effort to get

down. My expectations were fully met and we struggled through the entrée thanking our hosts for the unique experience. The main course that followed was the staple of all cattle stations – roast beef.

It has always amazed me that with thousands of beasts to choose from cattlemen simply cannot bring themselves to harvest a nice sappy yearling from their herds when choosing a killer. Invariably they will seek out some old barren cow or 7 year old bullock that has escaped the muster for the last 4 years. Not content with harvesting the worst possible beef they then proceed to cook out every vestige of moisture it contains.

A huge cut arrived from the oven to table and Eddie steeled his carving knife and ceremoniously began to saw the meat. Whilst so engaged he explained the circumstances of the harvest.

The bullock had been caught up in a muster of young steers destined for shipping to market. Eddie, try as he might, could not get it separated and into a race. He decided to shoot it in the yard where it stood before opening a gate to run the young animals off. 'By golly those beasts were so stirred up I almost missed the bullock and nearly shot a young steer that was in front of it.'

At this information, Owen, sitting beside me muttered under his breath 'Pity you didn't, we seem to have lucked out all round with this meal.'

The beef that night also lived up to expectations and we chewed our way through what we could – politely refusing second helpings.

After the meal Clementine announced it was time for some music. She duly stroked the keys of the piano and Betheny regaled us with a number of hymns. At the first break we made our apologies, pleading the need for an early morning rise next day, and escaped into the night. Ever since that night I have never been able to look at a peacock without the memory flooding back.

So ends my first excursion into the vast uninhabited tropical north of Australia.

Eventually we locate a suitable property in the Gulf of Carpentaria with a good population of wild boar and feral "scrub" bulls and settle an agreement with the owners.

Coincident with birthing this new activity I overstep the mark once too often and find myself unemployed.

There is nothing like a lack of income to focus the mind. Fortunately I have negotiated a nice little package with my previous employer to ease the pain of unfair rejection and set about building a new career.

I am out of work and need to think quickly to recover an income stream and do so in a fashion that will allow me to devote periods of time in the field if I am to build a successful safari business.

Step one, the income stream is achieved by establishing a wine marketing consultancy. Having achieved considerable and notable success in direct marketing with my previous employers I manage to jag a well paying marketing consultancy with a major regional competitor along with a few, less onerous, smaller contracts to supply materials and guidance to several small producers.

I had recognized very early on that the birth of the World Wide Web offered to completely change the game of marketing and communication and was well abreast with developments. The commercial availability of the internet was the tool to free me from the need to be in physical contact to produce the materiel and plans my customers needed. Communication by email with supporting visits to educate, plan and reinforce tactics became my modus operandi.

This allowed the opportunity to develop Buffalo Safaris and operate hunting camps.

The professional safari hunting business in Australia is miniscule, there would be less than a handful of outfitters who can derive enough ongoing business to be fully supported by their hunting revenue. In total there are probably less than 15, professionally managed and licences, full or part time businesses operating in the country.

We commence to advertise and by good fortune and connections in the gun trade we secure 6 bookings for our first round of camps, pig and scrub bull hunting.

Our first set of camps is due to commence early September 1997. Kim is in Africa with a client and will not return until 4 days before the first customers arrive. Owen is busy on his sheep station in Central Queensland and will not be able to assist.

I enlist the aid of a good friend, Bob Fraser, a retired surgeon and we head off from Victoria with an overloaded Toyota Hilux dual cab towing an equally overloaded trailer on a 3,500 km trip to the hunting concession.

I am both excited and apprehensive - it is make or break time.

After 2 days on the road we head in to Mt Isa, a sprawling, dusty, mining town of some 20,000 people centered in the middle of nowhere over a rich seam of copper lead and zinc.

Why go there? It has an airport and we are meeting Kim who has flown up on his return from Africa.

We overnight in *the Isa*, as it is affectionately dubbed by north Queenslanders, then stock up on fresh foods and head north towards Hell's Gate!

The first European explorer, Ludwig Leichardt, passed though the north of Australia in 1845 travelling from Brisbane, on the east coast to the, then operational, British fort at Port Essington on the Cobourg peninsula on the north coast of what was to become the Northern Territory.

This outpost was the site of the introduction of buffalo and banteng onto the Australian mainland in the 1830's.

Leichardt endeavored to repeat a similar feat several years later and his party was never seen again. The indigenous natives inhabiting the north of Australia were particularly ferocious in protecting their territory. Leichardt was just the first of many early travelers, prospectors and settlers to meet their maker in clashes with the aborigines.

Right up to World War 1, the vast swathe of country in the tropical north of Australia was a very dangerous place to be traveling through.

The name 'Hell's Gate' was given a small gap in the escarpment, through which the track from the east coast settlements passed on the journey to Katherine in the Northern Territory. The gap was dubbed 'Hell's Gate' as this was the point where the police escort would leave their charges and return to their base 200 miles east on the Nicholson River.

From Hells Gate travelers were left to their own devices until they reached the safety of Katherine, some 500 miles away.

The explorer, Nat Buchanan, travelled this route when he led a group to establish the first two 'cattle stations' in the Northern Territory in 1881.

The Hells Gate roadhouse was established on Clifdale station, about a kilometer from the infamous geological site, by Bill and Leona Olive in 1986 in order to earn some much needed income at a time of historically low beef prices.

We arrive at the Roadhouse the next afternoon and spend the first of what was to be many interesting and well lubricated evenings with Bill over the period we hunted Westmoreland Station.

Westmoreland, our ultimate destination is an isolated, 500,000 acre, patch of virgin bush land adjoining Hells Gate and stretching to the Northern Territory border.

Next morning we arrive at the Homestead. There is a 2 story dilapidated, cement sheet clad, affair, built sometime in the 1960's with a kitchen and living area at ground level and several bedrooms upstairs. This is inhabited by the current owners. Of much greater interest is an old stone building nestled under two enormous spreading mango trees, the original habitation – more on that later. A netting fence topped by a couple of barbed wires surrounds the housing and machinery sheds. A pack of around 10 dogs, of all colours,

shapes and sizes but one common aim – to tear to shreds any unwelcome arrivals - greets us in a writhing mass of barking energy.

Gary Gould, the owner, emerges from under grader he is working on in one of the sheds. He is expecting us and his cursing settles the dogs as he opens the gate and greets us.

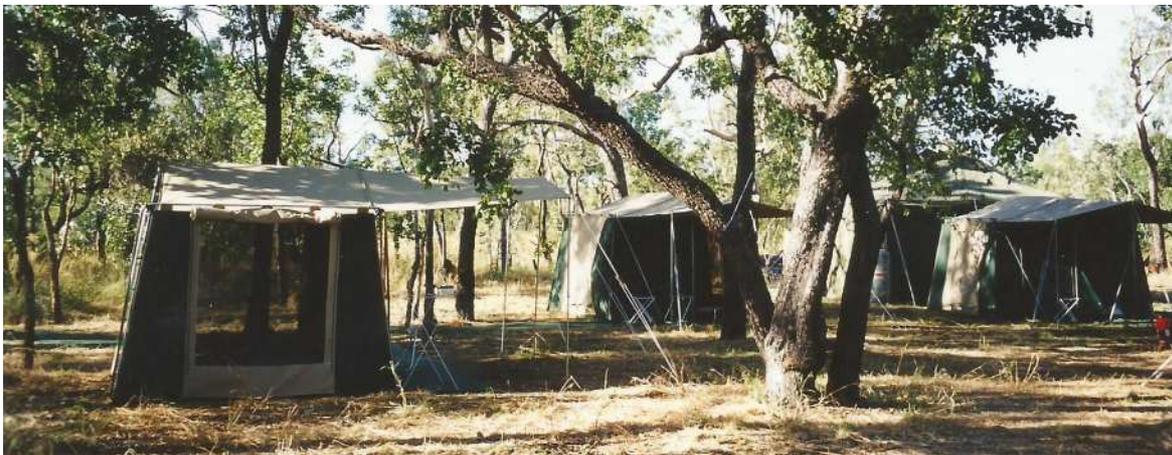
The pack of dogs, disappointed at the lost opportunity to attack and maim, immediately lose interest and disperse to various shaded spots.

Gary ushers us into the living quarters and we are greeted by his wife Diane.

Over the obligatory cup of tea and home baked cake we discuss options for a campsite and agree in one that Owen has previously surveyed. I have been gazing around the room and the two sets of buffalo horns mounted on the walls have my attention. Gary explains that, whilst there are no resident breeding herds on Westmoreland, vagrants, usually younger bulls turn up regularly.

Over the next few years hunting Westmoreland I can attest to the veracity of that observation, by sighting a number of buffalo. However buffalo are not what we are here for. The hunts we have booked are for scrub bulls and pigs.

A week is spent in assembling the camp from the gear we have packed. camp comprises a reasonably spacious, purpose built, canvas living/dining tent, 4 canvas guest tents, 2 twins and 2 singles along with a roughly plumbed shower /bathroom.



Our camp on Westmoreland

Two portable 'Port a Potty' toilets shrouded by canvas complete the customers quarters. 'Port a Potty' toilets are a unit upon which you sit on that comprises a small tank of water on top of the waste tank and a flushing handle on one side. Such devices require emptying and cleaning periodically. Needless to say emptying toilets is a very undesirable, smelly task. It transpires that there is only one person equipped with the stomach to undertake this job. Little did I realize when digging the holes and burying the toilet waste all those years ago it would be training me for a future career!



The dreaded 'Porta Potty'

Hot water is provided by means of a 'donkey' a sealed metal drum which has an inlet at the bottom connected to a cold water supply and an outlet at the top connected to a tap from which the hot water is drawn. A small fire underneath heats the water. (We are using a steel beer keg, modified by Owen with the necessary plumbing, as our donkey.) Pressure is achieved by having the cold water supply raised several meters off the ground, in our case a 50 gallon Avgas fuel drum. Cold water is supplied from a similar fuel drum.

Power is limited, we have a 1kilowatt gasoline powered generator that is operated for about 14 hours per day from around 8 am till lights out at around 10 pm. Battery powered lighting and torches are the go after this time.

The kitchen area comprises a canvas roof with 3 walls and fly screen front with a separate vinyl floor into which we have placed a gas powered freezer/refrigerator. A household sink mounted on a demountable steel frame and a couple of tables to hold utensils and prepare food. In addition there are a number of boxes and bags containing god knows what.



The Kitchen

All the cooking will be undertaken on an open wood fire with the baking in 'camp ovens' (Dutch ovens as they are known in the USA) of both commercial and our own homemade design.

A steel plate on four 12 inch legs, with heat supplied by shoveling the requisite amount of glowing coals beneath is our BBQ.

Oh! If only we had known what we were getting into. A couple of days spent camping and cooking for yourself on primitive equipment is *'getting away from it all'* and good fun.

Operating 4 to 6 weeks of camps, cooking 3 meals a day for demanding clients, on the same primitive equipment is HELL!

Looking back I simply do not know how we managed to bake acceptable bread and cook varied and delicious meals, and keep smiling with scorched and burnt hands cooking on a fire in 100+F / 38C heat, but we did!



Beer Keg 'Donkey' alongside our cooking utensils – Cooking eggs and bacon over hot coals- *What Fun!*

Our first hunt is 3 clients looking for a scrub bull each and some pigs – it passes successfully and uneventfully. Our second is a group of 5 hunters on similar mission with the focus on pigs.

Our customers are flying in from Mt Isa by charter flight. They duly arrive late afternoon and we have them in the vehicles and ready to go to camp, just waiting for the twin engine Cessna 404 to take off. There is a minor problem with one engine – it will require a mechanic to fly out to rectify it before it is safe to take off. I take the pilot to the homestead to make the necessary calls and we head off to camp. We have plied our visitors with a welcoming beer and they are settling into their accommodation. I hear a call from one of our guests, a gentle, rotund, accountant. 'Barry there is a problem - this is not my suitcase – it is full of ladies underwear.'

Howls of mirth erupt from his companions accompanied by calls of "Oh, Euan this is not the place for cross dressing." and the like.

I have visions of a lonely suitcase doing the rounds of the carousel at Mt Isa whilst an equally lonely woman waits in vain.

He is panicking, his ammunition for his 450/400NE is in his case, along with all his other possessions – no ammo means no shooting.

'Don't worry – I'll take this case back to the plane on the strip – the mechanic cannot fly out till first light tomorrow. I'll telephone and see if he can locate your luggage and bring it with him, if so, all will be sorted by lunch tomorrow' – sorted it was. Such was the first of many minor problems that plague any business operating in the wilderness.

Buffalo Safaris was off and running.