

## Cape York, August 2011

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The August edition of The Obsession carried a brief description of our separate travels from Adelaide to Mt Carbine for the official 'start' of our Cape York adventure. Now with the stores packed and the vehicles fuelled up, we were ready to roll on the 5<sup>th</sup> August.

A leisurely drive along the black top to Palmer River and Lakeland then on to the Split Rock Aboriginal Art Site near Laura for lunch and a walk up to view the three art sites. These were impressive however the 'better' sites are closed to the public unless accompanied by a local guide. With the temperature in the high 20s we were beginning to acclimatise but still worked up a sweat. Then we travelled via Laura to the Hann River Roadhouse to camp for the night, sharing with the local colourful peacock, an inquisitive emu and a mob of cattle. But wait, that was not the original plan! Reports indicated the Maytown – Laura Track was very rough and would take longer than planned so it was decided to skip this and gain a day.

After stopping at the Musgrave Roadhouse for morning tea, we headed north towards Coen when Dave called over the radio concerned about a rattle from the rear of his Defender. After finding a place to pull over and jack up the rear, Dave found the source of the rattle was a broken brake backing plate. This was discarded (who needs it anyway?) then on the road again. A short time later Adrian called up on the radio concerned about an unusual noise from his Discovery (amazed he could hear it with the windows up and the air-con on). It was decided to press on to Coen and investigate further. A call to Peter Brown correctly diagnosed the source was a blown exhaust gasket with two broken studs. No repair was possible so it was decided to press on (eventually for 7,400 km all the way back to Adelaide) avoiding high engine revs if possible. Unfortunately this Saturday coincided with a local indigenous football carnival involving about 16 teams from across the cape. With post-match celebrations continuing until after 4am, sleep was hard to come by.

The next day we passed through the quarantine station with its tall termite mounds and collected our information packs then on to Archer River Roadhouse for morning tea. The dirt roads were generally in good condition ranging from corrugated to freshly graded although quite dusty. The dirt was interspersed with sections of black-top to facilitate passing as the Peninsula Development Road is used by trucks supplying locals between Cairns and Weipa. It also had regular caravan/camper trailer traffic with many 4WDs also carrying a tinny on the roof racks or towed behind. Generally the traffic was light but surprisingly some vehicles travelled through the thick dust without headlights on. A couple of hours after we left Archer River, the road was closed for about five hours following a fatal head-on collision between a 4WD and a truck. Then Dave called up concerned about another unusual rattle so again we stopped by the side of the road to investigate. This turned out to be a loose brake pad locating pin – the second one on that brake calliper was fashioned from a tent peg from an earlier repair. A new split pin was used and we were on our way. We pressed on to the mining town of Weipa and checked in to the camp ground by the beach. No swimming in the sea (beware the crocs) but Mike and Adrian enjoyed a refreshing dip in the swimming pool. This was also Dave and Chris's 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary so after watching the sunset (with about 50 others) we were off to the local bowling club for a celebratory dinner. The next day was a planned rest day with Dave chasing replacement brake pads (unsuccessful), Adrian chasing a feed of fish (successful) and Mike chasing the 'mythical' salt water crocodile (unsuccessful). Interestingly the local Western Cape College campus proudly displays its

daily attendance on an illuminated sign – 71% on Monday (maybe some were still getting over a hangover back in Coen).

It was now time to head for the Telegraph Road and the excitement promised by the Old Telegraph Track (OTT). We travelled the Batavia Downs shortcut and then on to the Wenlock River bridge and the Moreton Telegraph Station. The original 1887 telegraph station was replaced 50 years ago but it was still an impressive property. An early camp at Bramwell Junction enabled us to drive four km along the OTT to check our first challenge for the following morning; Palm Creek. Some vehicles had chosen to drive the bypass road after seeing the southern entry but we were confident it would not deter us – after all we were driving Land Rovers.

So we were packed up ready for an early start. There was quite a mix in the camp ground – typical of those we met all across the cape. Some were heading north along the bypass roads, others returning from the tip. Some wanted to watch us and other vehicles tackle the first obstacle. We headed for Palm Creek, prepared to assess the options. A group of heavily modified TJM vehicles blasted through ahead of us then it was our turn. With guidance on wheel placement, we each got down the heavily rutted entry, through the small stream then up the other side through the tight, eroded exit gully. One down, about 16 to go!

Ducie Creek was a wide, muddy crossing (the TJM mob had stirred things up a bit) with an eroded exit. Mike practiced using his car-bra here. Then shortly after crossing the mud puddle called South Alice Creek, Dave called up with yet another concerning rattle. This turned out to be another loose brake pad locating pin; this time the left rear (Dave, have you got those heavier duty split pins now for this job!). North Alice Creek came and went and the next was the Dulhunty River. This was a beautiful spot with clear, flowing water, a rocky base and a cascade downstream of the crossing so a little play in the water here before heading for Bertie Creek. After checking the rocky bottom and avoiding the deep holes, we all crossed this fast flowing creek before heading on to the notorious Gunshot Creek.

The OTT is only a single vehicle track, eroded in parts and in some places where trees have fallen across the track, a bypass has been slowly worn, an indicator of how long ago the obstruction occurred. Often one side of the track would be dry bush with the other side recently deliberately burnt and green shoots growing. Usually the fallen trees resulted from these burns with tree trunks smouldering for days. Although progress was slow, the drive was much more pleasant than the often heavily corrugated bypass roads we would use on the return journey. Because the track follows the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL), we often saw the old telegraph poles still standing (not used since 1987) although all the insulators had long since been souvenired. Back to Gunshot. This crossing is but a shadow of its former 'glory'. The steep, hazardous entries and exits are still there for those that want to risk them but we chose the less damaging route. The peanut gallery was non-existent; an indication that there would not be much action to cheer about here.

Finally on to Cockatoo Creek but first we stopped at the grave of WJ Brown, a linesman on the OTL who died in 1945. Even in this remote location, vandals had long ago stolen his brush-hook tool so a replica had been made and placed at the site. Cockatoo Creek was a wide, strongly flowing stream with a rocky bottom. The deep holes were avoided with some assistance from the spectators before setting up camp on the north bank under a large, new shelter, complete with loo. Only 55 km covered this day. Here Dave repaired some damage to his jerry can bracket from an earlier scrape.

The next day we passed Sheldon Lagoon; what a great place for estuarine crocodiles to call home but we did not see any. One can only imagine the sight if we returned at night with a spotlight. We joined the main Bamaga Road with its corrugations, dust and high speed vehicles before reaching the start of the northern section of the OTT and the track in to Fruit Bat Falls on Eliot Creek. What a fantastic spot; it is day-use only so not too many visitors and a safe place to swim. The water was refreshing and sitting under the waterfall was like having an invigorating spa. We reluctantly left there and headed for Eliot Falls. This was a popular camping spot as well as a great swimming location. We all swam at Twin Falls on Canal Creek at its junction with Eliot Creek; even Dave and Chris's two teddies got in on the act. Walking the banks of the creek also revealed many pitcher plants eagerly awaiting their next meal; this environment was obviously very favourable for them. But time to move on.

A stop by the old linesman's hut on Canal Creek for a cuppa before driving upstream through the creek to the exit. Then on to Sam Creek; another small challenge here but in each case walking the crossing showed the preferred route. A short drive brought us to Mistake Creek; no mistake here but plenty of air under the wheels on exit. Another couple of kilometres and Cannibal Creek was the next obstacle. An 'S' bend through the creek then heading north a short distance to Cypress Creek; the last of the five creeks flowing east into Eliot Creek. Crossing the notorious log bridge (with fingers crossed) over this creek was easy with guidance on wheel placement then time to pitch camp; less than 50 km covered this day but some delightful swims made up for this – there is no rush.

We left the next morning in fog for our last day on the OTT with some trepidation. We had the notorious Nolan's Brook (also called Bridge Creek but the bridge no longer exists) to cross. Our first crossing was of the boggy Logan Creek, choosing a couple of different lines. We arrived at Nolan's Brook to a large gallery of spectators. It was often reported to us that at least 39 vehicles had died in this crossing so far this season requiring expensive recovery. We did not plan on adding to that number. So the three blokes walked the crossing while Chris continued to knit. Lots of advice from the on-lookers, snatch straps at the ready and in we went to much cheering and yelling of advice. We all got through although the water was deep enough to give the sensation of the vehicle being light enough to lose traction. We watched a few other vehicles tackle the crossing then by the time we had finished our lunch there was a total of 19 vehicles that had crossed or were waiting to cross for the day– no wonder the gallery was entertained. Then it was on along the boggy and sandy track to the south bank of the Jardine River for an early camp and to check the location of the old vehicle crossing, since replaced by a ferry. Only 25km covered that day but plenty of memories in that short distance – mission accomplished.

Up early, we headed back down the OTT to the track out to the Bamaga Road, bought our ferry/camping ticket, crossed the Jardine and headed for 'the tip'. After checking a couple of the campground alternatives we settled in at Umagico. This decision was based on the great beachfront location and grassed sites, not on the fact that the manager drove a defender 130 (but Dave was able to get his replacement rear brake pads at last).

It was decided to head for the tip the next day, a Sunday, freeing up the rest of the stay for a trip across to Thursday Island. We headed in to Bamaga then north to the Cape York Souvenir Store (also called the Croc Tent). This section of road is heavily used by all travelling to the tip but we felt it was the worst section of road for the whole trip. A couple of souvenirs and a tea/coffee later we diverted to Punsand Bay for lunch. Every meal came with chips; we settled for Spanish mackerel; superb. Another 14 km saw us arrive at the

parking area for the walk to the tip then we got the hats and drinking water out and clambered over the hill. A group was just leaving as we arrived so we had the place to ourselves. It was photos on each other's cameras, a hand in the waters of the Torres Strait and more teddy photos then time to move aside for another group. By now it was too late to head for Somerset Beach for a beach drive, instead taking a drive back through rainforest scrub. We avoided the worst of the road back by taking a narrow, sandy track back via Loyalty Beach (I could hear the shock absorbers give out a sigh of relief). We arrived back in time for a celebratory drink watching the sun set over the bay.

Monday was a rest day, no fishing off the wharf at Seisia as the barge from Cairns was being unloaded. But a fallen coconut was scavenged and de-husked by Adrian (to the amusement of onlookers) to have some fresh coconut flesh. Tuesday was spent checking out the sights closer to Bamaga. Firstly we checked out the airport and searched for WWII plane wrecks then a trip out to the old wartime radar installation at Mutee Head and a drive to see the mouth of the Jardine River. Wednesday Mike and Adrian headed over to Thursday Island with Dave and Chris staying behind for further R and R as they had done this trip on their earlier visit. Thursday Island was most interesting but bloody hot. Surprisingly the fuel prices were more than 30c less than on the mainland.

Thursday had arrived and it was time to head for home. Travelling via the two bypass roads, we camped at Moreton Telegraph Station next to a big, old mango tree. A strange noise during the night was discovered to be a cow and her calf outside the tent eating the fallen, green mangoes off the ground - weird.

The next day we stopped at the free river campsite just north of Coen. It became quite crowded by the time it got dark. The following day heading south we stopped for morning tea and fuel at Musgrave Roadhouse. When a tour bus heading north pulled in for their tea break it was realised the tour leader, Mike, was Tighe's brother-in-law. Then Adrian recognised one of the tour participants as his neighbour from across the street. Leaving the PDR we headed in to Lakefield National Park, bypassing a few dusty camps before camping at Kalpower Crossing for a couple of nights. Here the plan was to catch barramundi for dinner, unfortunately this did not happen (Adrian's excuse was the water in the Normanby River was too cold). We all drove back and forth a couple of times across the ford in an attempt to clean some of the dust from the vehicles. Still no saltwater crocs sighted.

Finally it was time to head for Cooktown via the Old Laura historical homestead. We were only about 50km from the bitumen when Adrian reported over the radio that he had a flat tyre. This was the only one for any of the vehicles for the whole trip. Unfortunately this happened on a corrugated section of road so the flat tyre was not recognised until smoother road and by this time the tyre was beyond repair. After a lunch stop and a paddle at Isabella Falls we arrived in Cooktown very satisfied with our individual achievements.

Dave, Chris and Adrian decided to drive out through the Hope Vale community to the coloured sands at Elim Beach. Although it was blowing a gale, the sands were very spectacular and worth the round trip. That afternoon Adrian's wife, Joan, flew in to Cooktown from Adelaide to join him for the trip home. The trip finished with a celebratory dinner at the local bowling club, capping off a magical trip.

A fantastic trip. Many heartfelt thanks to our trip leader, Dave, for doing such an excellent job under, at times, trying circumstances. And thanks, Mike, for the great company and discussions.