

Australia 2006

Kununurra - Savannah Way - Alice Springs

Leg details

Date September 5 - September 23, 2006

Leg Kununurra - Ivanhoe Crossing - Katherine - Bitter Springs (Mataranka) - Roper Hwy - Roper Bar - Lomariem Lagoon - Savannah Way - Burketown Crossing - Butterfly Springs - Borroloola - Carpentaria Hwy - Tablelands Hwy - Caranbirini Cons Res - Lower Amazon Lagoon - Barkley Homestead Roadhouse - Davenport Range NP - Sandover Hwy - Alice Springs

Leg map (click to enlarge in separate window)



Kununurra - Roper Bar

Kununurra - Ivanhoe Crossing - Katherine - Bitter Springs (Mataranka) - Roper Hwy - Roper Bar

The night in Kununurra is sticky and the temperature does not drop below 20°C.

Well, we have already reached September 5th and this means summer time with hot and humid days and nights up here.

We get up early and drive to the hospital where the doctors confirm Ruedi's fever as a bladder infection.

As they want us to stay in Kununurra for the next 3 days just in case there is a complication we check in at the **Ivanhoe Village (Big4)**, the same caravan park we had already been in 1995.

The temperature in the shade reaches 46°C and we decide to leave town the next day as soon as we have finished the washing.

On Wednesday, September 6, early in the morning we are woken up by the sound of a large fire that expands very rapidly with explosions.

We can smell the smoke but cannot see the fire which makes us very nervous.

Should we get ready to evacuate the caravan park?

Susi starts packing up things while Ruedi finds out what is happening.

Soon he comes back and tells that they are burning sugar cane fields close by.

We go and watch the big blaze.



Then we leave town towards **Ivanhoe Crossing**.



It is an interesting crossing.

Even though it is all made from concrete because the water runs so fast it is very irritating to drive over the dam.

One can see small crocodiles (saltwater ones this time!) laying on the small rock in the middle of the river.



We explore all the gorges nearby and also the river bed. Because this is crocodile-country we are careful where we walk.

Even though the water looks absolutely inviting and it is hot (38°C) we know that swimming in these waters could be a deadly mistake.

The estuarine crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) or "salties" can be found in fresh and salt water, up to 100 km or more inland in lagoons, swamps and tidal sections of rivers and creeks.

They have also been sighted up to 100 km out at sea.

They can grow up to 6 m long and on the ground over short stretches they can reach speeds up to 60 kmh.

So be careful. Even though you may not see them rest assured that they will see you!



We set up camp directly at the crossing. It is a great little spot and our MiniMax-modem is capable of giving us Internet access even out here.



We stay for the next 2 days and enjoy the beautiful setting.

We can watch an Intermediate Egret (*Ardea intermedia*) and the Rufous Night Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*) go fishing, a Straw-necked Ibis (*Threskiornis spinicollis*) seems to be more interested in insects today.

The nights are rather warm with temperatures that stay in the low twenties; the days are hot and humid.

We will definitely have to come back in winter and stay a few more days in this idyllic spot.

On Friday, September 8, we head off in direction of Katherine, 500 km away.

Due to the time difference of 1 1/2 hours and our speed restriction to 70 kmh to save fuel we will have to keep moving all day to make it to the caravan park. Judith and Guido have reserved a table for us in one of the best restaurants in town.

We set the cruise control on 70 kmh and travel through the beautiful Saddle Creek mountains. We are so lost in trying to recognise things that we saw back in 1995 that we miss the speed reduction sign in Timber Creek. And Murphy is present ... we get stopped for speeding. But luckily the Northern Territory does not know demerit points!



Close to Katherine we travel along bush fires and have the chance of watching them very closely. The bush fires up north don't burn hot. That's why they are not as dangerous as the ones in the south. It is interesting to see the birds of prey flying over a bush fire waiting for animals that flee the fire or even collect the burned ones after the fire.

We reach Katherine on time and enjoy an excellent dinner at the restaurant. A light wind makes the mild night with its 20°C very relaxing, no more of this sticky stuff we had in Kununurra.

On Saturday morning it is time for Judith and Guido to return all the gear they had borrowed from us as they will be heading north to catch their plane back to Switzerland in a few days.

We will be travelling south to Alice Springs.



First stop is **Bitter Springs** with its 34°C warm water. Discovering the underwater world with goggles is quiet an experience. We like Bitter Springs better than Mataranka.

We look into the map to find our way to Alice Springs and decide to drive towards Roper Bar and then continue on the **Savannah Way** for a while.

We turn into Roper River Road and find a spot for camping at Eisey Creek Crossing.

We are disappointed to find such a pretty place littered with empty beer cans

After a refreshing night with only 13° C we continue our way. As usual the sun is shining. We can't really remember when we have seen rain the last time ... was that in Perth?

The days have cooled off a bit too and we only see 30° C.



As we drive along on the dirt track we suddenly see Water Buffalos. They were introduced by the British. When the settlements failed the buffalo were let loose. Because they caused damage to crops and also often have tuberculosis they have almost all been killed.



Shortly before **Badawarka Station** at the quarry we find a small track that leads to the **Roper River**. We find a beautiful spot with great views but we also see many crocodile tracks and know that we have to be careful. We decide to stay here for a few days, work a bit on the truck and enjoy the warm days and cool nights.

We explore the surroundings and find something like a pump station at the billabong nearby.



There is also a measuring system that shows how high the Roper River can flow at times.

When checking the satellite-phone mails our Swiss friends Fredy and his wife Monika let us know that they are coming on the Savannah Way from Queensland.

What a coincidence that we happen to be on the Savannah Way too. So we inform them where we are and ask them when they think they will be in NT.

We find it very exciting to be out bush and still thanks to the Satellite-phone being able to communicate with friends over the mail, SMS, or even call them up if we feel like it.

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On Tuesday the day starts a bit cloudy with a very impressive sunrise. The clouds dissolve soon and another sunny and hot (36°C) day begins. We pack up and travel to Roper Bar.



Again we must experience that a beautiful setting is polluted with beer cans ... what a shame.

Les Hiddins describes a side track leading to the **Rocky Bar crossing**, the old crossing of the Hodgson River.

Curious as we are we start looking for the turn off and after much searching find a small track.

We see the track on the map and follow it but suddenly the map and the track start diverting more and more.

After driving forth and back a few times we decide to park the OKA at the closest point to the crossing and then head off by foot and look for it.

We pack our gear (GPS, water, food, sunscreen, sat-phone, hats), take the GPS position of the OKA (so we find back) and start searching.

But all we find is a washed-out section where all tracks seem to end.

We decide to walk to the river and try to find the track form there. We start tracking our walking track with the GPS.

Due to the sometimes thick scrub and high grass we have to walk detours, climb over rocks, go around wash-outs, etc and change the direction all the time.

The OKA quickly disappears from our view.



On our way into this dry area we find a Two-lined Dragon (*Diporiphora bilineata*) and lots of Sundew (*Drosera indica*).

About 45 minutes later we reach the almost dry river and find the track. The old crossing is a section in the river with a natural section of rocks that make a perfect crossing. This seems to be a well-liked picnic and fishing spot as the track on the other side of the river is clearly visible and often driven.

As we cannot find the track on this side of the river it looks like it has been washed away a while ago.

It gets hotter and hotter (34°C) and we decide take the straight way back even if we have to cross high grass.

We walk like elephants to (hopefully) scare any snakes away. But I guess seeing us walking like this they would die of laughter before tourists out bush!

Back at the OKA we look at the GPS tracks and are glad that we did not have a GPS-failure down at the river.

With all the detouring we did on the way to the river we would have had no chance to ever again find the OKA without help.

Lesson learned: either don't go in detours or take 2 GPS's with the recorded position of the truck along with you.

Back at the OKA we find satellite-phone mail from Monika and Fredy proposing that we meet up in Borroloola on Friday.

That gives us still lots of time to look around.

Looking for a place for the night we drive up to **Tomato Island** Camping but this seems to be for Barramundi fishing people only.

So we continue our way and soon enter an area where there are billabongs left and right all over the place.



We find a very nice one and camp right beside it. The bird life is amazing.

During the night the temperature drops to 18°C and a light fog hovers over the billabong.

Early in the morning the birds get really active and flocks of Ibis, Herons, Egrets and various sorts of ducks visit the billabong.



Right in front of our window an Australian Darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*) cleans his feathers. We can lay in bed and watch him doing so. I don't mind bird watching like this at all

Later on we can also watch a Rainbow Bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*) and some Black-Necked Storks or Jabirus (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*) .



We follow the **Roper River** with all his secluded little fishing and camping spots and soon enter the proposed **Limmen NP**.

We start looking for the turn-off to the **Lomarieu Lagoon** but it is a bit confusing because the old signs mentioned in the guide books have been removed but the new ones have not yet been set up.

We finally find the white-painted remains of St. Videon homestead and shortly after find the lagoon.



What a sight!

The lagoon is covered with water lilies and has paperbarks all around the edge.

There are water birds everywhere, Burdekin Ducks or Radjah Shelducks (*Tadorna radjah*), a Brolga (*Grus rubicundus*; the one on the right side with just a red stripe on his head) and we even see Sarus Cranes (*Grus antigone*; the ones on the left side with red head).

One would not expect to find salties in this peaceful place but during the wet season when it floods the lagoon joins up with the Roper River so you better be careful.

We decide to stay for the day at this beautiful place.

We follow the north-facing track of the lagoon.

The track is overgrown and every so often the OKA pushes a tree or branch a bit to the side.

Suddenly a branch of a dead paperbark breaks off and starts falling. Ruedi steps on the breaks which proved to be the wrong reaction.

The branch slides from the roof over the windscreen destroying the radio antenna and bending the base of the UHF aerial 90° to the side.

For next time we know that we have to continue driving so the branch falls behind the truck and probably breaks the radio aerial of the Radio installed in the backsection :-)

After this experience we decide (like many other before us judging by the tracks) to move a bit up-hill away from the paperbarks.

The track is good but leans a bit to one side. This angle gets bigger and bigger. Susi sits uphill and does not really mind it that much but Ruedi who leans towards the lower

part is soaked in sweat. After a few hundred meters luckily the track gets horizontal again and we find a very nice spot for the night.



This is the view from the "kitchen"-window. Not bad, hey?

With this setting as background we start working on the pictures that we will use later on to describe the OKA on our web-page. The light reflects so intensely from the water that it is quite difficult to get proper shots.

In the evening the nice view does not help to keep the cook happy.

While Susi is cooking dinner the Wallas cook top stops working. Ruedi has a quick look and means that this looks like a bit more work and will have to be done on Friday, when we meet with Monika and Fredy. So much for a hot meal bread and butter+ are fine too as it is still hot.

During the night we can hear animals coming to the water for a drink but we cannot see them. At one time it sounds like horses having a bath in the billabong.



In the morning fog covers the lake but gives way to another sunny and hot day.

We are getting used to this weather, cool nights with temperatures just a bit below 20°C and day temperatures in the mid thirties.

It is already Thursday, September 14, and we have to get moving if we want to be in Borrooloola by Friday.

As we travel along the Savannah Way suddenly something brown and hairy jumps in front of the truck just a few meters in front of us. Ruedi hits the breaks but has no chance ... we have committed our first road-kill ... we feel pretty lousy.

In the map we find a 4x4-only-track along the billabongs to the Wadamunga Lagoon and marine swamp that looks interesting. At the beginning the dirt-road is easily visible but as we drive along it gets narrower and the washouts get deeper and deeper.



Then we cannot find a turn-off, all we see are vehicle tracks on the grass. As the tracks match the direction given on the GPS-map we leave the dirt-road and follow these tracks.

They have a strange width, not standard "Toyota"-width that one would expect out here.

The tracks get fainter and fainter, at some places it is almost washed away and we have to be careful with the OKA not to slide off the road and roll over.

We cross a creek bed that is almost as high as our tires. The OKA handles it beautifully, we are impressed.

[Link to AUS_060914_OKA_on_track.wmv](#) (size 2'709 KB)

Note: Format is .wmv, Windows Media Player required to play it.

Then we lose the track completely. As this is a proposed national park one is not supposed to create new tracks so we decide to turn and go back to the dirt-road.

When we get back to the dry creek we realise that the angle of the embankment on this side of the creek is much steeper than the one on the other side.

Due to the spare tire the departure angle in the back is not as good as the front one.

As we cannot find any other place to cross the creek close by Ruedi decides to cross at the same place. Susi gets out to film it.

Slowly the OKA makes it down the embankment with the front wheels. Then Ruedi accelerates to have enough momentum to get up the other embankment.

The back wheels start sliding down the embankment and the spare wheel gets hit so badly with the full load of the OKA and its back section that Susi feels the earth tremble where she is standing and filming.

[Link to AUS_060914_OKA_up_the_creek.wmv](#) (size 709 KB)

Note: Format is .wmv, Windows Media Player required to play it.

Well, there was not too much damage done, just the second last chassis cross-member got bent.

But one has to see it from the good side too: the departure angle has been improved a bit ;-)

We continue travelling on the Savannah Way and find a brand new bush camp with toilets at **Towns River**.



The view is great, there is even a place to water boats.

But there are crocodiles ... large warning signs remind you all the time.

We continue towards **Limmen Bight Fishing Camp**, hoping to get some water.

They have a bowser with Petrol, Diesel is sold by the cherry can.

The fuel is close to 10 cents cheaper (yes, cheaper!) here than it was at Roper Bar.

The shop is not too well stocked but maybe that's because it is already out of season.

But they don't really have lots of water so we decide to carry on and look for a creek or river with fresh water.

We would like to camp at the **4 Archers** but somehow can't find the track leading to it.

We follow another track that goes in direction of the river and find a nice camping spot.

We find ourselves more or less on the other side of the 4 Archers.

The river banks show many tracks of crocodiles. It is quite frustrating being in crocodile country but not seeing a single crocodile, not even from far away.

We are still too much "degenerated tourists" and don't know how to look out for crocodiles.

Maybe one would see them better during the night?

But we are chicken (or call it cautious). As our instincts would not warn us on time we decide not to leave the truck during the night.

It is already Friday, September 15, and we are supposed to meet Monika and Fredy in Borrooloola tonight.

This is not realistic so we send them an SMS via Satellite-phone telling them that we will be a day late.

They reply that they got "stuck" in Hells Gate Roadhouse and will be a day or two delayed too.

Great, this gives us more time to explore the Savannah Way.

At the **Limmen Bight River Crossing** we find a simple campground with toilettes but find the bush camps on the rivers embankments much nicer.



There are large flocks of Double-barred Finches (*Poephila bichenovii*) getting a drink.

We continue and hope to get water at **Nathan River**.

The water does not look to good so we decide to go to Butterfly Spring. It is the only place all over the Savannah Way where one can swim in a water hole without having to worry about salties.

Again the track shown on the map that leads to the springs does not exist anymore. We can see the old track but it is overgrown.

We find a stretch of grass that allows us to cross over to the track but it looks not used at all.

The only tracks we can see are again those non-standard-width tracks.

As we find out later, these smaller tracks belong to the rangers Quad.

We decide to go back to the main road and just press on in direction of Borroloola.

Soon after we see a brand new sign pointing to **Butterfly Sprigs Campground**.



We find a small campground with new toilets but no water.

As we explore the area we see a water hole with a small waterfall feeding it with fresh water.

This is perfect. We decide to stay and get water from the waterfall.

After a great afternoon of swimming back and fourth to the waterfall getting water we have full tanks and feel refreshed.

[Link to AUS_060915_Water.wmv](#) (size 4'342 KB)

Note: Format is .wmv, Windows Media Player required to play

The ranger and his family come for a swim too. As he watches us filling water bag after water bag he asks what we are doing.

After we explained it to him he offers to get the water at the ranger station. He likes a visit every so often.

Well, we will visit him next time.

The ranger also helped us identifying the birds visiting the water hole.

This time we are sure that we saw a Pheasant Coucal (*Centropus phasianinus*).

[Link to AUS_060915_Pheasant_Coucal.wmv](#) (size 4'342 KB)

Note: Format is .wmv, Windows Media Player required to play

While Ruedi takes the Wallas cook top apart Susi cooks on the Cobb. That little grill is very versatile and the bread you can bake on it tastes great.

Luckily the clogged up stove can be fixed and the cook can move back into the fly screen protection because there are march flies at Butterfly Springs.

As the night comes we hear many new animal voices.

Especially the frogs are very active and can easily be watched.

We are so impressed with Butterfly Springs that we mail Monika and Fredy and tell them to come here.

We give them the exact GPS position and they plan to be here in the evening.

It is another hot day with temperatures reaching 38°C.

The water in our "washing machine" (a black 30 lt watertight bag from Ortlieb that is laid into the sun and shaken by every person walking past) gets so hot that Susi has to wear gloves to remove the clothes for rinsing.

Monika and Fredy arrive late at night and the next morning friends of them, Ueli and Trudi, also arrive.



So we all gather together and get organised. Monika and Susi exchange photos from our last get-together in Perth and Alice Springs, the men work on the vehicles and Trudi reads.



Monika and Susi go butterfly watching. There are thousands of butterflies at the springs.

Over night they sleep in the trees.

During the day they move over to the walls around the water whole. The walls look like if they are alive because of the constant moving around of butterfly wings.

We decide to hike on top of the hills the next day. Because of the heat we will have to get up early on Monday morning.

We are not used to this anymore and with a bit of whining and complaining we leave the camp.



The views are great but it gets hot soon and we are glad to go back to our water hole.

Luckily we need water again and have to swim a few times through the water hole to the water fall. Isn't life treat one hard sometimes?

On Tuesday, September 19, the group splits up, Monika and Fredy and also Ueli and Trudi head north and we continue our way to Alice Springs.

In **Borroloola** we get Diesel. Thanks to a tip from Monika we visit the shop in **Yanyula** that is much better stocked than the one in Borroloola.



We continue travelling on the **Tablelands Hwy**.

With temperatures in the high thirties again and no rain yet all is dry. It doesn't take much to start a bush fire.



We change over to the **Carpentaria Hwy** and visit **Caranbirini Conservation Res.**
We find it fascinating to walk between these walls of stone.
Sometimes it looks like somebody cut through the stones with a knife.



The water hole is not well visited but we find a Prying Manta and a lizard that we think is a Central Military Dragon (*Ctenophorus isolepis*).
Please correct if we are wrong.

It is a shame that camping is not allowed at Caranbirini Conservation Res. but we soon find a nice little spot close to the river to stay over night.



Travelling further south we find that soon after the **McArthur Mines** the road gets narrower and the condition deteriorates.
Looks like the road has been sponsored by the mine



The guide book says that the Nullarbor is the loneliest road in Australia. We disagree, it must be the Carpentaria Hwy!
It is an endless stretch of road over a flat, mostly treeless tableland, no animals on it, nothing.
The heat (41°C) seems to reflect from everywhere and it feels like being in an oven.

We can watch a few willy willies, one of them quite large and its dust cloud visible until high up into the sky.

In **Cape Crawford** we get some Diesel and are surprised how much dearer it is than it was in Borrolloola.

Note to the reader: Cape Crawford is not as one would assume on the coast, it is actually quite a long way inland. Some explorer saw the headland and thought that it was the coast ...

With our travelling speed being only 70 kmh we get passed by a few cars. One of them is a Commodore full of people.

Soon later we get passed by two utes and have a short talk to them on the UHF radio.

A few minutes later we hear them on the radio again discussing a car on the side of the road that seems to have a problem.

But they reckon that they got the tools and continue their way.

A bit later we see the Commodore on side of the road. The woman flags us down. The jack in the car is missing a piece so she cannot change the flat tire.

Ruedi assist and soon the Aborigine family (2 women and 12 children) are fine to continue their trip.

They tell us that they are on the way to Barkley Homestead Roadhouse to meet up with the family.

The older lady comes over and wants to give us a present. It is a linen bag with something that moves. She opens it and out looks a Joey with large scared eyes.

Susi's heart flies out to the poor little thing. But reason tells us that we shouldn't accept it as without any proper milk and baby bottles it would soon die.

So we tell the ladies to take it along to Barkley Homestead Roadhouse.

Slowly we continue travelling and find our way to the **Lower Amazon Lagoon** (some ca.50 km north of Barkley Homestead Roadhouse) and stay over night.

The lagoon is well visited by birds and kangaroos. In the evening the cows come for a drink.

The sunset over the lagoon is very beautiful, the sun reflects in the water.

Every so often we hear planes. This sound odd as we are out bush, Alice Springs is still hundreds of km away.

It looks like we are in a direct line between two airports. We realise how we are not used to noises like this anymore.

Luckily the temperatures over night still drops to approx. 17 - 19°C making sleeping really comfortable.



On Tuesday morning we get Diesel at **Barkley Homestead Roadhouse**. After having been out bush for a while it is strange to see all these road trains. Mind you Barkley Homestead Roadhouse lays on the Barkley Hwy, the bitumen connection road between the Northern Territory and Queensland and is well travelled.

We travel 11 km towards Mt. Isa and then turn south into a small 4WD Track towards the Old Police Station Waterhole.

There is no sign but the car tracks on the bitumen show that there is regular traffic coming on to the bitumen.

We lower the tyre pressure and find a problem with the front right tyre, we can only lower to 56 PSI. Let's hope we don't get into sand



The track soon becomes narrower and corrugation starts. Between **Purrukuwuru** and **Walkabout Waterhole** we hit the bull dust for almost 20 km.

It is a hot and dry day with 41°C and the dust just seems to stay in the air.

We see a dust cloud coming against us and wonder if it is a really large willy willy.

But it turns out to be a HiLux travelling on the bull dust. The ute seems to float or to glide through the dust.

Dust keeps squirting out of his wheel arches like if it was water.

It looks so good that we forget to grab the camera. What a shame, it would have been a good object to explain what bull dust really is.



We reach the **Davenport Ranges** and choose the 4WD track down to the **Frew River**. There we find a nice camping site right at the waters edge close to the **Old Police Station Waterhole**.

There is still lots of water left in the river. One could go for a swim but there is algae. Even if the day's temperature has reached 39°C the water is to cold for Susi. There are many flocks of Cormorants all over the place.



On Friday we continue travelling south. The ranges are very beautiful.

After one of the many creek crossing we start seeing traces of liquid on the dirt track, like of something was leaking.

After the next crossing the leaking gets stronger. Ruedi recons that we will soon see a car standing on the side of the road.

Sure enough, we find an old Falcon. The engine is still warm.

We follow the road and a few km later we find 3 sweating Aboriginal men walking along the road. We offer them help and they accept a lift to their ranch, just a few km away.

There we fill a few buckets with water for the radiator of the car. We are also allowed to fill our water tanks with excellent water.

We return to the Falcon, fill the radiator and the car starts instantly. As no instant flush of water occurs they think they can make it to the farm, so we say goodbye and continue our way.

Thanks again to David, his brother and his uncle for the water. And next time, we will stay for the party at Canteen Creek!

As we travel further south we reach the **Hatches Creek Mine**. It's an interesting place to visit but watch out for the underground tunnels!

Later on we find a nice little water hole for lunch before reaching the **Sandover Hwy**.

Well, we would not call the Sandover a highway at all. The road is in such a bad state it's just unbelievable!

The corrugation is not the worst thing, it's the holes in the road, the sharp edges of where there must have been some surface cover that has been worn off.

Driving on the Sandover is like constantly having to look out for the best way to avoid pot holes.



As it is too dangerous to drive on the Sandover at dusk or night we decide to camp out bush even though we are only 100 km away from Alice Springs.

We find a nice and quiet spot close to Mt. Skinner.

The night does not really cool off, it is muggy and the temperature stays at 23°C. So we get up early and start packing up.



When checking the surroundings if nothing was been left behind we find these mounts. Guess what it could be no, it's not an ants hill.

[Click here to find out who lives there.](#)



Slowly but surely we make our way back into civilisation and reach Alice Springs.