

Australia 2008

Volunteer Rangers at Finke Gorge National Park, Citizenship

Leg details

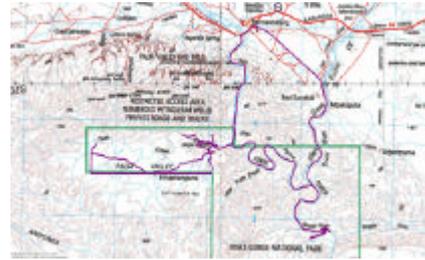
Date July 4 - August 3, 2008

Leg Around the Finke Gorge National Park

PDF



Leg map (click to enlarge in separate window)



Initially it was planned to start our volunteer job at Palm Valley in the Finke Gorge National Park on July 1st 2008 but it came quite different



While doing the 50'000 km service on the OKA Steve Golding from Alice Mechanics in Alice Springs discovers a broken rear differential dog clutch. This means we have to order a new differential from OKA and replace the rear differential. This also means that we are now "homeless" and have to move to a Motel.



This gives Ruedi the chance to try to get his sound recording software running on the laptop. His goal is to get the first part of our 2008 movie done with sound and speech and all the bells and whistles! But due to a software error in the external sound card software the system just crashes all the time and he gets very frustrated. But after an email to the software company a few days later a patch is ready for downloading and all works fine.



Susi gets some time to stroll around the caravan park to find nice flowers she hasn't already taken pictures off



... and to watch some animals.



The work on the OKA turns out to be a hell of a task because Steve injures his hand the first day he works on the axle! So Ruedi works almost a full week in the pit.

But life was not meant to be easy for Ruedi ... soon some more trouble starts



No matter how long and hard Ruedi and the other mechanics whack the axle shaft with the slide hammer it just won't move!
So the tools get bigger and bigger ... at the end a sledge hammer and a rod is used to bang the axle shaft out from the other side
The axle shaft had twisted between the dog clutch and the spider gear.



Only now they are able to get the differential apart, have a look at the damage and order the new parts from OKA it is definitely time for a new differential
Luckily OKA has one sitting on the shelf and on Thursday it is picked up in Perth by TNT to be sent over to Alice Spring on Friday on the truck via Adelaide.
Expected date of arrival in Alice Spring: Tuesday, July 1st.

This means that even though OKA immediately sends the ordered parts we will not be able to start our volunteer job until July 4.
Luckily the currently present volunteers can extend their stay at Palm Valley until we arrive.



So while we are waiting for the parts to arrive in Alice Springs also the rest of the OKA is checked, the leaking break fluid supply line fixed, etc., etc., etc. .

On Wednesday morning the TNT courier arrives and drops a pallet with a large and heavy peace on it.

When Steve asks for the second package the driver says that the second TNT truck will deliver it a bit later on.

After the shop has been closed to the public and no more walk-in customers can disturb Steve and the crew they get the parts ready to exchange the differential.

Then Steve realises that the second parcel containing the new axle shaft has not been delivered!

Katherine tries calling TNT but they have closed for the day. Steve will pick up the parcel tomorrow on his way to work.

On Thursday morning Steve brings bad news instead of a second parcel TNT has no clue where the parcel is

We just cannot believe it, get into the car and drive over to TNT.

The lady at the reception is not very helpful and tells us that she cannot say more than she has already told "the chap that was here before".

Well, soon she has to realise that there is a small difference between the "chap" and us: we are the paying customers

When Ruedi asks for the manager on duty she quickly changes her tone and gets the manager.

The manager tells us all about how the parcels are sent over from Perth and that they are unloaded in Adelaide and ... that he has no clue where our second parcel is!
Ruedi gets a bit more upset and explains to the manager, that we are paying 400 \$ for a service that is called "over night" and that the parcel was supposed to be here yesterday.

He wants to know to whom we can escalate this problem and where we can send the bill for our extra nights at the motel

The manager gets the message and in no time he is on the phone talking to some people in the Adelaide TNT cargo area.

He is lucky and finds the person who is right now handling our second parcel.

The parcel is stopped and redirected to be sent to Alice Springs by plane and not truck; it will arrive at 4 AM on Friday morning.

There is only one small problem: Friday is a public holiday in Alice Springs, nobody will be working at the TNT depot

But the manager offers that he personally will take care of the parcel and will deliver it to Steve's mechanical workshop.
We promise to be there by 8 AM to receive the parcel.

On Friday morning at 7:50 AM the manger from TNT arrives at the workshop and delivers the parcel.

Thanks for that!

Soon after Steve and some of his crew arrive and the shop is hustling and bustling.

Even though it is a holiday the crew is present as they have so much work to be done ... including unexpected and delayed but urgent work like our OKA!

While the guys are busy fitting the differential Susi goes shopping so once the OKA is ready we can leave as quickly as possible.

Late in the afternoon the OKA is ready and Steve takes it for one last test drive.

Then we are off to the Palm Valley where we arrive during the night.

We will stay at the valley until the end of July and help with the daily work.

We will be working with the rangers Andrew, Leanne and Simon.

On Saturday morning we are invited for breakfast at the house of the Leanne and Simon as welcome for us and good-bye for the leaving volunteers Peter und Eve.

Then work starts and we are introduced to the cleaning job by Leanne.



We are also allowed to use two bicycles from Leanne and Simon so we don't have to drive the OKA from the ranger station where we live to the camping area every morning.

After a bit of greasing and adjusting the push bikes run fine and we are now mobile.

During the day a group of Sydney Uni students arrive from their bush camp.

They will be staying here at the "visitors lodge" for a week and perform special tasks e.g. the counting of the palms in the valley, an animal survey etc. and we will be able to go along (once we have finished our duties!) and also sit in at the lectures given to the students by the rangers in the evening.

We are also shown around the ranger station



... the large shed with all the tools, cleaning equipment etc. ... the fire fighting units, waiting for an emergency ...



... the "social club", where the locals gather every so often to have some quiet beers around the fire.

Simon created this area with lots of loving care using old signs, some old metal scrap and other pieces to create the bar stools.

On Sunday we get serious and give the amenities block a spring clean.



A large huntsman that lives in the ladies toilet refuses to shift house and has to be forcefully evicted



The ride from the ranger station down to the camping area and up again is not easy but it is very pleasant.



In the evening we can watch a beautiful sunset and over night there even is some drizzle

On Monday we continue with our daily duties.

Besides the daily cleaning of the amenities block and the picnic area we also have to pick -up rubbish on some walks every so often.

So we also decide to tackle the rubbish collection along the Mpulungkinya Walk at the top of the Palm Valley today.

If only women had better sense and would realise that the toilet paper they leave behind after going for a wee will not compost in this dry climate and has to be picked up by hand by somebody!



But first we have a closer look at the famous Central Australian Red-Cabbage Palms and read about the history of Palm Valley on the excellent information tables. Did you know that the water that the palms use is fossil water, some of it up to 300'000 years old?

[For some more details on them click here.](#)

There is lots to be seen ... and also a lot of rubbish to be picked up



But the nice things still count more ... the reflections in the water ... some interesting rocks



... some trees that live under large boulders some that are only attached to vertical rocks by their roots we wonder how they survive!



It is very dry and most areas that normally have water are dry too only traces of minerals are left where the water used to stand ...



As we climb on top of the plateau we find this tree.

Even though it has fallen over and his shallow roots no longer can hold him up it still continues on thriving and does not seem to be disturbed at all with the strange angle it is in



... some trees have tangled their roots around some rocks for stability amazing.



These ants seem to have developed their own building techniques too ... that "chimney"-style outcrop on top of their mound ... no idea what it is for ... the ranger could not tell us either maybe a special way of dealing with the heat they encounter in summer?



The views down into the valley and the palms are especially nice in the late afternoon when the red of the rocks shines brightly. Some birds for sure know where the best spots are!

While the Sydney Uni students are here a 3 day long animal survey is carried out.



On the first day some 300 metal traps are unfolded and equipped with baits (oats and peanut butter that is wrapped in a bit of paper). They are placed on 3 different levels on a hill, some in Spinifex and some on rocky areas. Then the GPS position of each trap is taken as sometimes it is not easy to find the traps anymore.

In the late afternoon a group of students goes out to ensure all traps are set correctly and the little doors are open.



In the morning Susi can join the ranger and the students to check the traps. Shortly after 8 AM we start climbing up the hill.



The views into the valley are very pretty.



Then we split up into different groups, each one checking a different area. If the door of a trap is closed the trap has to be carefully checked for an animal. If the animal gets too agitated they might hurt themselves in the trap.

All open traps have to be closed so no animal can get trapped in it during the day. Even though it is winter the sun is still too strong; the trap might get too hot and the animal trapped inside could get killed.



There are also some pitfalls where animals walk along a barrier and then fall into a bucket that is buried in the ground.



The found animals are then taken back to the ranger station for proper identification.

In the afternoon the crew that goes up hill to set the traps again will take the animals back and release them where they were caught so they are back in their own territory.

During the 3 days of the survey we find a few animals, mainly small mammals and some lizards.

One cute mouse-like common visitor to this area is the fat-tailed Pseudantechinus.

[Click here to learn a bit about it.](#)

But we also do other jobs.

On one occasion we can go along to check a broken-down electrical fence.

We squash into the Leanne ute and off we go on tracks that are not open to the public.

The electrical fence is required to stop the wild horses of just pushing the normal fence down to get into the park.



When we reach the broken-down section Leanne shows Ruedi how to use a measuring tool showing on which side of the fence the power is interrupted. We work our way along the fence and try to find the problem.



Along the way we collect wood for the fire used during the "ranger's talk" at the camping area. We also pass a "one-way-access" gate that has been put into place to let horses escape from the park but not to re-enter. The horses are lured outside of the park by something good to eat ... but somehow the last three horses remaining in Palm Valley have not fallen for it. One can see their tracks leading to the gate ... but that is all!



On and on the fence goes in certain areas the terrain is pretty rough We find sections where the fence has a problem and fix it but each time when we test with the tool it shows that the fence is still not working. Then we reach the end of this section. The solar installation works fine, the wires are all ok, we have no clue what is causing the problem and give up. Simon will have to come out with better tools and have a closer look at it.



On the way back Leanne shows us some places where the Aboriginals used to sharpen their tool. Too quickly the days pass and already it is time to say good-bye to the students. After a BBQ at the social club and a late night they leave early on Saturday morning. As we are getting ready to head down to the camp for cleaning Leanne tells us that Mavis Malbunka, the Arrernte Traditional Caretaker of Tnorala (Gosse Bluff), will be having a talk at the bluff. She will be going and asks if we want to come along. No question! We postpone our cleaning to the afternoon and off we are. Again we all squash into the Toyota and dash over to Tnorala. Mavis and her husband and some other Arrernte people are already there.



Soon Mavis is explaining the dreaming of Tnorala and some other interesting things about bush tucker and the history of Tnorala to the audience. [Click here to hear her explain the rights of a caretaker](#) (file type: .mp3, size: 555 KB). [Click here to see a movie of her explaining some bush tucker](#) (file type: .wmv, size: 2'483 KB).



It is also quiet intriguing to imagine that a massacre happened here is not that long ago. Mavis remembers that her father told her that he had seen the bleached bones lying in the sun in this valley ... [Click here for the details on Tnorala and its history.](#)



After lunch it is time to go back and clean the camp ground the duties are calling Leanne and Simon will be going on holidays. We will take care of their animals during that time.



The night before they leave Leanne and Simon come for dinner and we have a bit of a late night
Suddenly we hear one of the dogs outside the OKA.
He has jumped over the fence and is looking for his masters guess that means, that it is time to come home ...

Early the next morning Leanne and Simon leave.
From now on we are in charge of two dogs, Tomby and Melville, and four chickens.
Susi is more used to dogs and takes over the role of feeding them and taking them for a walk.
The chooks seem to be happy with the new management and each lay an egg per day
We actually manage to give the full set of animals back to Leanne and Simon no losses

During our stay Blanka (Susi's brother's daughter) and partner Richard are passing through Palm Valley on an organised tour.
Their tour is supposed to come past Palm Valley on a Thursday.
By now we know when their tour operator (Adventure Tours) always arrives at the picnic area for lunch before heading up to the Cycad Gorge and to the walk.

After the cleaning we park the OKA in that picnic area and have a long lunch.
But no Adventure Tours Bus arrives ... we get nervous ... did we misunderstand them the other day when we discussed the day when they were coming through ...?
Or did we miss them?

We decide to head up to the Cycad Gorge and collect rubbish there.
They must come through there if they come today!



As it is the first time that we collect rubbish up there we first have a close look at the Cycads.
Then we collect rubbish and wait until 3 PM ... it is hot (27°C, not bad for the middle of winter) and no Adventure Tours Bus shows up
Frustrated we head back to the camp.
Over and over we try calling Blanka and Richard's phone but nobody answers.
Well, we will try again tomorrow.

On Friday, after a cold night with only 1.5°C, we head down to the camp ground.
It feels very cold on the bicycles ...
There are only 5 parties on the camp ground so we finish really quickly.
We head back to the ranger station and try calling Blanka and Richard again their phone is out of reach or turned off ... great!

After lunch we head back to the picnic area and see an Adventure Tours Bus there.
Quickly we head over and check if we had the dates wrong and they are here today but they are not in this group.
So we give up and head back to ranger station again.
One last time Susi call the phones ... and they are picked up!

"Where are you?????"
"We are in Alice!"
"When did you come through Palm Valley?"

"Yesterday, at 3:15 PM"
We missed them by 15 minutes!

They had had a sleep-in in that morning, had lunch before reaching Palm Valley and had gone straight up to the Cycad Gorge and the walk.
When arriving late in Alice Springs they had found the missed calls and voice messages but as the park has a suppressed number they were not able to call us back
And as they slept at a Backpackers they had to turn their phones off and forgot to turn them on again once they went into town.
No wonder we were not able to reach them!
Ah well, such is life.

But now we have to get organised really quickly because we want to meet them in Alice Springs it is only 157 km to Alice Springs no real distance out here
As it would be too cold for the dogs to stay outside until we return Andrew will put them into the house for the night and give them their evening cuddles.
And off we go

We reach Alice Springs in the afternoon, collect some cleaning stuff for Andrew and then meet with Blanka and Richard at the Overlander Steakhouse.



After an extensive dinner with Kangaroo, Camel, Crocodile and Emu it is already time to say good-bye to them and head back to Palm Valley.
It is quite dangerous to drive at night and watching out for the kangaroos keeps us both awake, no worries.
Besides that it is very cold in the driver's cabin as we still have a broken heater cable ... Susi is not impressed

It takes us at least twice the time it took us to drive into town to drive back.
At 1 PM we park on our "spot" and head to bed in our warm "home".
Andrew will let the dogs out so we can have a bit of a sleep-in nice!

The next morning we are woken up by warm and gusty wind.
We head down to the camp and start working.

Red sand is blown into all and everything.
A woman had done some washing this morning which was hanging outside her van.
In no time all is plastered with red sand

Susi just finished cleaning the amenities when the wind picks up even more.
The visibility drops to below 3 meters, this is a real sand storm.
In no time the whole amenities block is filled with red sand and looks as if it had never been cleaned in the last few weeks.

Susi is furious but it makes no sense to clean it again.
We have to wait until the wind dies down, which according to Andrew will probably be late in the afternoon.
So we head back to the ranger station.

It is not very pleasant to ride bicycles in this storm but at least the wind blows uphill which makes the ride a bit less hard.
Outside the OKA the wind blows red clouds past and we have to keep the windows closed, witch makes it a bit sticky in the OKA.
So all we can do is have a bit of a siesta, poor us ...

On a Sunday Andrew wants to take us to Boggy Hole for some Spinifex burning and to have a close look at Circular Gully, the gully we had seen from the plane on our first trip to Alice Springs in 1995.

He gives us a hand with the cleaning and soon we are on the way to Hermannsburg and over to Boggy Hole.
But duties first we collect a fair bit of the usual toilet paper and rubbish and burn it.



After lunch we climb up to where Leanne and Simon had already done some burning to have a look.



Along the way Andrew gives us some information on the different version of Spinifex that exist in Palm Valley. We can hardly believe that there is a curly Spinifex that does not sting, but we can feel it and really feels more like grass than the prickly stingy stuff.



We also get a bit of a Geology lesson.



We also come past some more ants with "chimneys" on their mounts but Andrew cannot explain us why they do it.



Then the big moment arrives, we have reached the patch of the last burning. Even though the wind is still a bit strong Andrew decides that we can burn a few patches. In no time the Spinifex is ablaze and it gets really hot.



After a while the fire reached the containment line that was set by Leanne and Simon and dies down. We keep the lower parts under control and to quickly the whole burning is over

[Here a movie for the little pyromaniacs amongst us](#) (file type: .wmv, size: 11'866 KB).



On the way back to the Toyota Andrew takes us over to Circular Gully. The views are just great and he definitely makes Ruedi's day!



Then we head back to the Ranger Station via the Finke River. This used to be a public access road but the sand is too soft and the trees hang too low so it has been closed off. We would be allowed to use it but we decide that it is too narrow for the OKA ... and besides that we don't feel like digging sand we are getting lazy Already we have reached the last week of our stay.



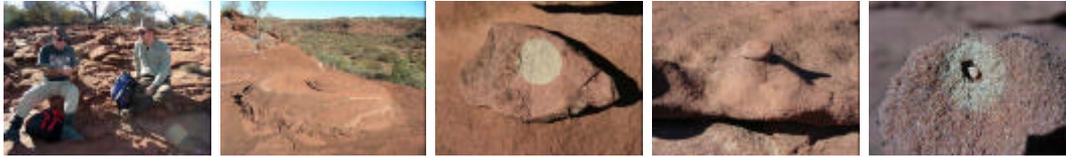
Taking advantage of Ruedi being here Andrew comes down to the amenities block for some repairs. There is always something broken that needs fixing or some toilets that don't flush properly anymore



This gives Susi some time to watch some animals.

Time flies and already it is time for Simon to come back from his holiday. As he still has a day off we agree that we will go for a walk the next day.

We pack the backpacks and follow Simon into a valley that is usually not open to the public.



We stop to have a closer look at some interesting rock formations, mainly generated by erosion.



The walk is very pretty and takes us back into the main valley.



We are surprised to find water along the way.



There are also some more interesting formations.

In one instance water has left some marks on the wall ... to us it looks like a person lifting one arm



We also get introduced to Buffel Grass, one of the worst weeds ever introduced to Australia by the graziers. Buffel takes over and kills all the native grasses and small plants in the area.

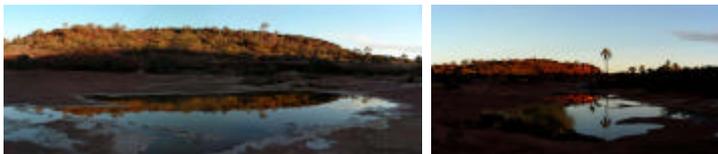
They try to fight it as good as they can but they have only managed to keep a very small valley buffel-free

During our stay at Palm Valley Ruedi gets the invitation for his citizenship ceremony.



It is perfect timing as it will be held near Perth right after we finish our stay at Palm Valley.

So we book some flights over to Perth and let Andrew know when we will be leaving.



Our last walk in the valley takes us up a small creek. It is very peaceful and typical for the atmosphere in Palm Valley.

Then it is time to clean all and fill in the work report.



We have worked a fair bit, have learned a lot and have had lots of fun.

This is definitively an experience that we will want to repeat.

And then the big day arrives



In the late afternoon of August 5 2008 we arrive in Cockburn (spell it Coburn please!) where Ruedi will become an Australian by choice.

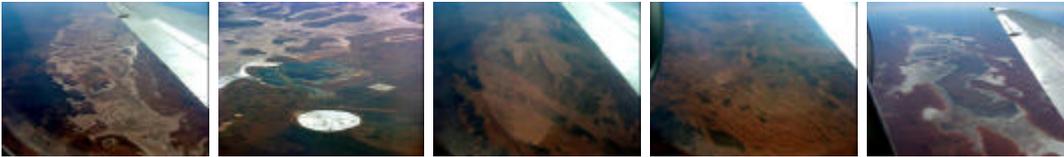


The group of citizens -to-be is quite large; each has his reserved seat, the spectators are all placed in the back. The major is an ex-immigrant himself and guides through the ceremony with lots of good humour.

[Click here for a movie on parts of the ceremony.](#) (file type: .wmv, size: 3'233 KB).



After the pledge each of the new citizens is presented with the certificate and also the citizenship medallion. One more very proud Aussie



Our flight back to Alice Springs gives us some very pretty views over the red country and the salt lakes.



Our flight also takes us over the Palm Valley.

Today we know what that special "river"-bed is down there Circular Gully

We also recognise Wallace Rock Station (because of the 1 km bitumen stretch at the entry of the community they only just had completed a few weeks back ...) and other things around Alice Springs from the air

It feels good to come back in the Outback it feels a bit like coming home

No liability for timeliness, integrity and correctness of this document is taken.
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