

Journey to the Centre of Oz

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This reflection is based on a recent five-week camping trip to Australia's Red Centre with my husband, David. The trip, like a tapestry, had several interwoven threads, two of which are: the beauty of the outback of our vast country juxtaposed with many signs of environmental damage; and the camaraderie of campgrounds with their joy of laughter and warm conversations juxtaposed with the evidence in several towns of economic stress and folk living on the margins.

So, like a tapestry where the final pattern is a mix of light and dark hues, our experience had both light and dark moments.

Our route on this 6,800-km trip took us through the Flinders Ranges, up to Uluru and The Olgas, to Kings Canyon and the West MacDonnell Ranges; and then to Alice Springs and a week-long muster of about 200 folk who have similar campers to ours at Ross River. Our route home went via Coober Pedy and parts of Victoria we know well.

The environmental thread was constantly with us. I have spent 30 years living abroad and, now that I have time to explore my homeland, I feel constant, almost-childlike wonder at its stark beauty. The grandeur, the stillness, the changing lights and colours always fill us with joy. Palm Valley in the Fink Gorge National Park was our favourite place with all the elements of a natural perfection: rugged cliffs, unique cycads and ancient palm trees, rockscapes and rock pools.

Our conversations as we drive focus on how the changes in the terrain might reflect changes in rainfall, wind patterns, soil composition, and deforestation. In the parks area, we wonder how long the area looked like this. Our grand rock formations are stable sights but how has the surrounding area changed over time? In farmlands, what might this area have looked like before the land was cleared for agriculture?

While I have emphasized the beauty we experienced, there was often a sense of regret as we saw evidence of the damage that we (*Homo sapiens*) have wrought to this beautiful land. Light and dark, beauty and sadness.

And now to the community theme. One reason for the trip was the muster at Ross River. We are relatively new to camping in Australia; most of our camping has been tenting around southern Africa. However, age (knees and hips!) dictated the acquisition of our elegant and robust camper.

We have been delighted with the friendliness of folk we have met on our travels. For example, we experienced rain on the Oodnadatta track resulting in road closures in the region but the stories of clay mud, flat tyres (including us), and changed plans at the Pink Roadhouse caravan park in Oodnadatta were all told with quirky humour and laughter.

Perhaps the best example of quintessentially Australian community joy was the Henley on Todd Regatta at Alice Springs where the rules for the races in the event eluded competitors, commentators and spectators alike, but everyone had lots of fun in the hot, sunny, sandy river.

The dark side of this community feeling was knowing that we and the folk we met on our travels were all affluent enough to travel. In many country towns there are empty and decaying buildings and unemployed folk just sitting around.

Some of this sadness can be traced to historical changes; for example, the rise and diminution of Oodnadatta is clearly linked to railway transport. The railway is now gone, its heritage in a quiet and dusty museum, and the town now only has tourism and cattle. Some of the rural sadness is also due to unresolved social issues, Alice Springs being a clear example.

However, to end these comments with a positive spin, we delighted in the way that silo art has energized several towns. We stopped at Owen for a new silo-art installation and received an invitation to join Owen's Mayor and local residents in their regular Monday coffee mornings, yet another warm and friendly exchange of stories.

This has been a few glimpses of our exploration of some of Australia's heart. Our next long trip will be up the east coast early next year, experiencing more of the delights and challenges of this land we call home.