

Mick Maurer

## **Aussie Travel**

(206) 557-4484

Mick Maurer is President of **Aussie Travel** in Issaquah, Washington. He and wife Karen have traveled extensively in Australia including driving a motor home from Sydney to Cairns, taking a paddle wheel steamer up the Murray River, trout fishing in Tasmania and a spending a week at an isolated ranch on Kangaroo Island. A copy of the quarterly **Aussie Travel** Australia Newsletter can be obtained free by calling (206) 557-4484.

### Camping the Australia Outback

This is a harsh land of distance and heat, so desolate and scarce of human life that only the foolish travel without a good radio, plenty of water, extra fuel and a couple of spares. They don't call it the "land of no second chance" for nothing. With scarcely more rainfall than the Sahara, the Great Victoria Desert spreads simmering flat and hot as a griddle. The sand burns bare skin, the sun fries it. In the winter it is so cold that ice forms on your windshield. Dingos, Wild Camels and Sand Monitors thrive. Witchetty bush and Saltbrush and Desert Oak and Poplar survive. Water is life. History books tell of early explorers providing salted meat, then denying drink until the Aborigines revealed their water holes.. We will parallel the Gunbarrel Highway (or what is left of it) as it cuts below the Little Sandy and Gibson Deserts through land that requires an Aboriginal permit for travel. Roads rutted enough to rattle your teeth and shake bolts loose. *And we chose to come here.*

My partner and I join eleven campmates at the James street hostel as daylight breaks over Perth. Parked out front, our 4wd vehicle, a box shape, olive drab, "Aussie" made OKA, looks like an army transport. "Swag" bedrolls and folding chairs and table fit on top. The tail gate covers an electric cooler, propane stove and cooking utensils. If you

look up “Outback Guide” in the dictionary you might find a picture of our driver, Terry Harrison. He explains the rules, “everyone helps with cooking and clean up, roll your own swag tight every morning, no smoking in the OKA, luggage goes on top, keep the passenger area clean and the short handle shovel and roll of paper are the toilet.”

The fully loaded OKA climbs the hills of East Perth. Small sheep and cattle farms gave way to extensive wheat fields as we pass towns with names like Meckering, Bungulla and Walgoolan.. The OKA is jarred by wakes of 30 wheel Mac & Kenworth, “road trains” going full throttle the other direction,. At noon we pull into a rest stop for sandwiches. and salad. The direct sun feels like radiation from a brush fire and we meet the Australian bush fly. A third the size of a house fly they hover in your face in search of moisture.

At Kilgorlie we turn north through gold mine tailings massed like small mountains across the desert floor. Hours later we stop in Leonora for diesel and ice for the drink and water coolers. The OKA can do 600 miles on it’s 50 gallon tank, but out here you don’t run low. The heat is stifling, even at 6 in the evening. This is the end of the paved road, eat my dust country. The OKA plows through the darkness. Hours later we swing into a side road, scattering a mob of feeding kangaroo. In less than 5 minutes a roaring fire lights our camp, a robust noodle soup is heating, and we are learning to roll a swag tight. Dinner is spaghetti with tomato lamb sauce and rolls. From a tank under the OKA dish washing water is so hot it burns bare skin. Beneath a sky full of stars that look like the inside of a diamond, sleep comes quickly.

5 A.M. is impatient. It comes just before the sun jumps off the desert floor. Terry shows us Dingo tracks 15 feet from my swag , he watched it sniffing near the fire pit around midnight. “They don’t harm people” he explains over a breakfast of cereal, milk and toast. The OKA is loaded and boiling road dust before 6 a.m. Near the Aboriginal town of Cosmo Newbury, we stop to photograph a group of wild camels. Estimates say several thousand inhabit the Great Victoria. In the road ahead three Aborigine men fiddle under the hood of a small pickup. Two women, three children and two scrawny dogs fill the bed. The

driver is tightening a loose water hose clamp, and asks for cold drinking water? We fill a liter bottle from our passenger compartment Igloo container. In the desert, the only thing more valuable than water is cool water.

Rusted vehicle skeletons peer from the brush on either side of the road which starts to look like a 300 mile long wrecking yard. At mid morning we stop to inspect an Aboriginal water hole. Animal and bird tracks on the edge affirm it's contribution to survival in the outback.

The deep sandstone reservoir, full of sand and gravel to retard evaporation has collected scarce rainwater for thousands of years.

Near Warburton we enter the Gibson Desert. The Warakurna Roadhouse provides restroom's and diesel. Wall clocks show times; 4:25pm here in Western Australia, 5:55pm in the Northern Territory and 6:55pm in South Australia. You can walk outside and hit all three with a slingshot.

We pass Docker River and after dark stop at Lasiters Cave campground. The camp has a table, fire pit and water tap. Beside a roaring fire we gorge on steak, potatoes, boiled cabbage and Dutch oven biscuits. We wash off the accumulated road grime under the spout of a rainwater tank 50 yards from camp. As I lay out my "swag" the stars shine as sharp as the wail of the nearby Dingo exchanging songs with a mate in the distance.

We again break camp before 6 a.m. The desert seems more friendly this morning, more trees and higher roadside brush. In the distance I can see parts of the Olga's which I had dismissed as just another tourist ballyhoo. At the crest of a long uphill stretch their presence crashes through the windshield into my senses, blazing red, gigantic domes dominating everything on the desert. Mesmerized, all I can think to write in my journal is "the Olga's-WOW!"

Everyone cheers as we find paved road again. Five miles later we park and follow a marked trail into the Olga's. The Valley of the Winds earns it's name but temporarily deters unbelievable swarms of bush flies. The rocky trail is mildly undulating, as we sweat, swat and photograph the stunning beauty of this dramatic series of 36 rock formations. Scientists believe prehistoric ocean currents gathered

millions of rocks and cemented them with sand and clay into domes that rise almost eighteen hundred feet above the desert floor. At the mid point we start up a steep rocky trail dotted with brush between two gigantic red monuments. A sparse grove of trees on the 700 foot high ridge, a thousand feet below the summit of the nearest dome, provides shade and rest. The trail in either direction is as steep as a mountain goat.

Two and a half hours later we emerge from the enormous forest of red rock domes and pick our way down a rocky trail, to the welcome sight of our patiently waiting OKA.

The refreshing pool at Ayers Rock Resort erases days of heat, dust and bushy flies from my mind. This afternoon we assault the worlds most famous monolith. At 3 p.m. thoughts of a refreshing dip in the Ayers Rock Resort pool quickly melt in the searing 100 degree plus as we start our assault on Ayers Rock. This is not the climb that loitered in my mind at home. The trail goes straight up the mountain which is smooth as river rock and higher than the Empire State Building. A metal chain connects posts set in stone and disappears above. It is so steep in places you cling to a post to prevent plunging to the desert below. This climb is dangerous, if Ayers Rock were in the United States, you probably would not be allowed to climb it. No one seems willing to talk about how many people are injured here, but Terry says at least one tourist is killed every year by fall or heart attack or both. Not comforting thoughts as I drag my perspiring body up the hot weathered chain. I spit and cuss as my labored breath sucks in hot desert air and a bush fly. I hope the end of the chain is the top, a hiker going down congratulates me on reaching the halfway point. It is long, hot, hard work for another 30 minutes. Struggling over a rise I am startled by a strong cooling wind. The view is enormous, flat desert punctuated by occasional clumps of desert trees with the stunning Olgas as a backdrop. For the next fifteen minutes, white paint markers guide the way through crests and valleys of undulating red rock. An hour and thirty two minutes from the base I reach the official monument at the top. One of our group arrived almost an hour ago.

The leg jarring trip down takes under an hour. Terry claims to have descended in 12 minutes once.

Wednesday is provide your own meal night. We go to the Outback Pioneer Hotel for barbecue your own steak, chicken, crocodile or kangaroo. We celebrate our successful climb with bottle of excellent Australian wine, then buy another for desert.

We rise at 5:00 to watch Ayers Rock at sunrise. The first rays catch the giant monolith creating more shades of red and purple than a full collection of crayola's. It seems almost alive, changing shape and personalities unconcerned with the flash of hundreds of camera's recording its awakening.

Leaving the rock behind, we travel for several hours past red rolling cliffs called the George Gill Range, stopping for morning Tea at the Kings Creek Station where they raise camels. At the Kings Canyon Resort campground we unload our gear and wolf down sandwiches before making the short drive to the Canyon. The trail is well maintained and, after the steep half mile climb up heart attack hill, levels out. We climb between giant slabs of sandstone on rough trails along the canyon rim. From tremulous precipices we peer down the face of red, yellow and white cliff sides so slick they could be a razor sliced apple. Descending wood steps at the head of the canyon, we turn right and follow the trail beside a lush creek bed named the Garden of Eden.. After almost a mile the trail abruptly becomes a flat rock slope that plunges into a crystal blue green pool of water. Flat rocks, trees and ferns encircle the football field size pond. We swim for forty five minutes before retracing our footprints to steps going up the opposite canyon wall. The trail continues across hot rocky slopes and boulder strewn paths down the back side of Kings Canyon. We arrive back at the resort in time for a refreshing swim in the pool.

After dinner Terry talks about his return to Perth. Two of the Japanese girls will accompany him on the express run back, an 18 hour marathon drive with only one three hour sleep stop. Terry proudly explains that

for \$180 Australian, about the same cost as Greyhound, he will beat them to Perth by 12 hours. We turn in early as usual.

On our final day, Terry rewards us with a late, 6 a.m. wake up. The OKA leaves pavement again at the Marani Loop road.. The road is rough, the worst we have seen. A wild stallion, tail flying, races across the road in front of us to join a colt and three mares on an opposite hillside. At Hermansburg we turn at a road signed “ four wheel drive only.” We crisscross the dry bolder strewn bed of the Fenke river, climb sand hills and crawl over rock outcrops for 35 minutes to the parking area at Palm Valley. This true oasis in the desert is a haven for Red Cabbage Palms, birds and reptiles. We take a short walk up the lush desert valley before lunch and a visit to Sacrifice Rock.. Terry’s explanation of the rituals of manhood that the Aborigines performed at this site are fascinating. They included forced isolation, sleep deprivation, circumcision, bashing out a front tooth, and scaring the chest. A herd of wild horses watch the OKA, in four wheel drive, crawl back toward the main road.

Driving toward Alice Springs, I sort through my expectations like a pocket full of pennies. I chose this itinerary because it looked like a “roughing it” outback experience. I was not disappointed. The dirt, bush flies and heat notwithstanding camping under the stars in the desert and climbing three of Australia’s major outback icons will live as treasures in my memory bank forever.

Before I can finish measuring my thoughts we arrive in Alice Springs, a modern day monument to the tenacity and perseverance of early settlers. With little support from a harsh and breathtaking landscape it has flourished purely on its own will to survive. It is no longer the dusty outback town made famous by author Nevil Shute in his book “A Town Like Alice”, but a thriving city of 25,000 that plays host to over 300,000 visitors per year. After five days and over two thousand miles I have a profound respect for all the living things that survive and even thrive here in Australia’s last true frontier. Despite it’s reputation as “ the land of no second chance”, I will come back.

### IF YOU GO:

Qantas and Anset Airlines serve both Alice Springs and Perth from the Australian east coast gateway cities.

You need to travel light with soft side luggage or a backpack. If you arrive with more luggage than you can take, Greyhound has freight service between Perth and Alice Springs.

Although there are many tours operating out of Alice Springs, there are only two that go all the way between Perth to Alice Springs.

**Travelabout 4wd Tours** leaves Perth every Monday morning for the five day trip described above. The approximate cost is \$499 and includes transportation, food and entrance fees to the National Parks. Their \$180 express return trip to Perth on Saturdays is not a tour and does not stop at any attractions. Travelabout can be reached by telephone in Perth at (09) 244 1200 or write Coach House Travel, Shop 22, Centerways Arcade, 797 Hay Street, Perth, W.A., Australia 6000

**Trek About Tours** does 6 day tours from both Alice Springs and Perth leaving on Wednesdays. The extra day includes a visit Hayden and Wave Rock. The approximate cost is \$623 and includes transportation, food and park entrance fees. There is a \$10.00 refund if you bring your own sleeping bag. Trek About can be reached at (089) 53 0714, P.O. Box 3533, Alice Springs, N.T., Australia 0871

In the United States you can book outback camping trips through

**Aussie Travel** (206) 557-4484, 24227 S.E. 43<sup>rd</sup> Place, Issaquah, WA 98029, or a travel agent certified as an “Aussie Specialist” by the Australia Tourist Commission. To obtain the name

of an “Aussie Specialist” near you call the Australia Tourist Commission at 708-296-4900.

More luxurious camping trips for travelers seeking greater comfort leave from Alice Springs, Adelaide and other major cities. These include large coaches pulling full size galley trailers, lighted tents and folding cots. Prices, which depend on the itinerary and facilities, start at less than \$90 per day.