

# The Simpson Bash

Part 1: Days 1 to 9

This adventure started following our first crossing of the Simpson Desert back in June 2010 which inspired our regular camping friends Greg and Tracy Klaassen to do a “tag along” trip across the desert in August to celebrate Greg’s birthday. Unfortunately the first planned trip in 2014 had to be deferred to 2015 when both Greg and Tracy couldn’t get time off. Regardless planning continued with the ladies doing the rationing and the lads doing the route and load list planning. Vicki and I decided to ditch our tent for a double swag and after much investigation paid out a small family fortune for a ARB double swag but after a trial weekend camping we unanimously decided to put the swag on two stretchers as the ground was too bloody close! Greg and Tracy stripped down their side on campervan – now called the “Turtle” to try and reduce the all important weight for easier sand dune crossing.



We tested the swag and stretcher option at home and Guntha approved

Finally after much shopping, packing, reloading and last minute stuff we happy campers crossed the start line on Saturday 1 August. The first day we drove from Townsville to Winton via Hughenden, some 588km. We had planned to stop at the old pub at Corfield but found the whole place closed as it was the towns three day horse racing carnival! Having been deprived of our first holiday drink we pushed on to Winton and booked into the fantastic Tattersalls Hotel for a mere \$60 a night.



The “Turtle” provided all the catering needs



We scored rooms on the second floor

The pub and its staff were very entertaining. We met Annie the manager who was a wizard at opening multiple beer bottles in a lightening flash manner which had us mesmerised. After a settling drink we checked out the local cemetery where we had heard the oldest grave dated back to the 7 June 1881 which was significant as it is the birth date of both Tracy and I but we couldn’t find it so we wandered the streets for a bit. We checked out Arno’s Wall which is a 2m high 70m wall around Arno’s home within which he has concreted all manner of things. It was both fascinating and just a little disturbing to see what he had stuck in his wall but it was well worth seeing. In his spare time Arno is an opal miner which probably explains a whole lot.



This section of the wall appeared to feature motorbikes

Given the amount of time we had we probably should have driven the 25km out of town to see the Australian Age of Dinosaurs which is reported to have Australia’s largest collection of dinosaur fossils. Another obvious highlight is due to the town gardener who is doing a cracker of a job shaping all the shrubs around town so they were all looking in great shape despite the drought. That afternoon we settled down for a great pub dinner and retired early.





Tracy and Vicki being raucous at the bar while Greg undertakes a more cerebral pursuit by reading the pub's history

**Day 2** started early when an amorous staff member in the room opposite expressed her ongoing satisfaction in quite a vocal manner which put paid to any attempt to sleep in! The day kicked off with an outstanding breakfast of Eggs Benedict and proper coffee at the Gregory Hotel after which we drove through to Boulia on the Kennedy Developmental Road – or as the locals call it, the Min Min Byway (named after the infamous Min Min Lights) then took the Donohue Highway to a bush camp on the Georgina River some 486km.



Spinifex plants and Mulga trees

We started to see very flat and dry countryside, obvious de-stocking has been forced upon the stations as very few cattle and sheep were to be seen – plus the ground was nearly all dirt with hardly a blade of dry grass to be seen. We did have a number of sightings of magnificent Wedge-tailed Eagles on the road side. We had the mandatory stop for a beer around morning tea time at the Hamilton Hotel. The pub is only one of two buildings in the whole town – but a pub is a pub!



The only attraction in Hamilton is the pub and its cold beer (Klaassen pic)

Back in 2010 the Donohue Highway leg was all dirt but to our surprise it was now nicely sealed. We pushed on to the Cawnpore Lookout for a proper morning tea break and checked out the panoramic view of the distant Lilleyvale Hills.



The ladies swing into action to get the coffee on while the blokes grab their cameras and swan off. Note the "knob" off to the left.



Vicki and I halfway up the knob (Klaassen pic)

Just as we reached the top of the "knob" we saw one particular view that just tickled our fancy – it was a fence line that ran in a dead straight line over craggy hills and deep creeks and we could just imagine a boss telling a young jackaroo – knock up a fence from here to here and get on with it!





The wooden fence ran across the knob and just kept going in a straight line – it would have been a bastard of a job!

Vicki soon found herself being the tour guide as well as navigator that specialised in all things geological. Greg and I were corrected when we started using the term “Jump Ups” and quickly changed it to “Jump Downs” when it was pointed out to us that the tops of the hills were in fact the remnants of the long gone ocean bottom!



I had been looking forward to the bush camp beside the Georgina River and nearly put some Redclaw pots in as the last couple of visits had given us a better than average feed of big redclaw. I should have been a tad more realistic given the drought as the river was heartbrokenly bone dry.



The mighty Georgina River, bone dry and not a Redclaw in sight (Klaassen pic)



The same stretch of river in June 2010

On the plus side we found a great camping spot complete with wheel rim fireplace and a wood pile.



It's not what you think! I have taken the wheel hub of its flat rock base and Greg is checking to see if the rock is solid enough to travel – it wasn't (Klaassen pic)

While the Klaassen's popped the “Turtles” top Vicki and I started coming to grips with assembling the two military stretchers. This simple process soon turned into an almighty battle as the bloody things took an amazing amount of muscle and teamwork to put together. Our 2 RAR brethren had given us a “soldiers five” on the easiest way to connect the end bit but do you think it would work for us! While we engaged in this protracted struggle at every bush camp site it wasn't until we got home that we felt vindicated as we had the lads give us a practical demonstration - which defeated the “experts”. That night we had a glorious fire under a full moon and had a great time satellite and star watching. As an added plus, with no



sign of moisture we decided not to put the fly up over the swag and in fact did not use the fly for the entire trip.



The rim even sat on a large flat rock

**Day 3** we slept really well and awoke to a very cold but clear morning without any dew and departed when we were ready. We continued west and drove through to one of our favourite bush camps in the Sleeping Woman formation and again it was sealed nearly all the way to the QLD/NT border. On the way we had to stop to muck about at the border then stopped again to refuel and grab an ice-cream at Jervois Station.



The mandatory border crossing picture (Klaassen pic)

One of the days highlights came just down the road when we spotted some bird action around a dam that was beside the road. When we pulled up we found ourselves surrounded by thousands of Zebra Finches. There were so many that their wing beats sounded like a roaring wind and they shot past and around us without fear or favour! At times it was safer not to move when a flock swept around you!



Every tree or shrub held masses of Zebra Finches



You had to wonder as to how did the birds safely fly through such dense branches



Swarms would land, grab a quick drink then roar off into the trees



There were a goodly number of Diamond Doves mixed in amongst the finches as well

Further down the track I spied a cattle yard with a whole bunch of white stuff on the ground and as we got closer I could see it was a massive flock of Little Corella's apparently sheltering on the ground from the gusting wind. We pulled onto the track leading to the yard and Greg and I slowly walked to within 30m before they took off – actually Greg charged them so we could get some flight pictures!



This is very a small portion of the large flock





Despite their numbers the Corella's were surprisingly quiet

We finally arrived at the Sleeping Woman feature where we were slightly disappointed to see a well worn track up and into our favourite camping spot and someone had even trashed the fire pit we had rebuilt. We had been experiencing some fairly strong winds but thankfully the wind dropped in the late afternoon and we could have a fire before it got too cold. We experimented with a fire in a small car rim that we had found by the side of the road but it was just too small. This is still one of Vicki's very special places.

**Day 4** and it was another dewless night. We did discover that Greg's cars rear right tyre was noticeably flat so we pumped it up and decided to keep an eye on it for the time being. We drove on to Hart's Range Police Station to check on the route through to Arltunga but a sign on the door said the station was closed but we had no sooner read the sign when the staff came out so see what was going on. It transpired that the local three day horse race meeting had just finished and the staff were trying to catch up on all the paperwork. Vicki shared some homemade biscuits with them and found that the track was closed and just a little dangerous. As Greg's tyre was still going down we decided to swap it for the spare while we were on solid ground and the police were kind enough to let us use their garage. The remainder of the dirt highway through to Alice Springs wasn't too bad with more patches of sealed road than we remembered.



We just love the Stuarts Desert Pea



Vicki navigated us through Alice to our accommodation at the Desert Palms Resort after which Greg and I went in search of a Yokohama tyre agent to have a look at the leaking tyre.

*I saw a car parked outside the local pub with a bumper sticker that said  
"I miss Alice Springs"  
so I smashed the windows, stole the radio, let the tyres down and left several empty VB cans on the back seat with a note saying  
"Hope this helps"*

**Day 5** and we spent the morning exploring the Alice Springs Desert Park which is one of those not to be missed places. As a bonus the park had undergone some extensive wildflower plantings and just about everything was in bloom – just super! They had also opened a new dingo exhibit with two very fine looking dingoes on display. We initially thought the enclosure may be a tad small for them but found out later that the keepers fight to take them for daily walks through the park. The big highlight was watching the bird display after which we bolted to the coffee shop just in the nick of time as a tour mob surged into the café and overwhelmed the lone girl on duty.



At one point the bird handler drew our attention to a dead tree some 60m away and right on cue a white face appeared out of a hollow





Then the white face turned into a barn Owl as it flew directly at us



The handler had the owl fly over our heads a number of times to prove you just can't hear the owl in flight – nor can its impending dinner!

We then did the general tour around the park which is just first class. To add to the occasion, Vicki and Tracy got a pleasant surprise when they had a staff member take the dingos through the nocturnal house while they were in there. After lunch we collected the repaired tyre even though there was no explanation as to why it was going down but the chap did warn Greg about one of the wheel stubs that was becoming bloody hard to do up. We then went shopping as I had left our large camp oven behind so we ended up in the Desert Dwellers outdoor shop and picked up a large oval camp oven before calling it quits and heading back for afternoon drinks.

**Day 6** and today we set off to explore the East MacDonnell Ranges starting with the Emily Gap Nature Park and its caterpillar dreaming sacred site.



The six dreaming caterpillar rock art

Next on the agenda was the Corroboree Rock Conservation Reserve (Antanangantana) which is part of the Eastern Arrernte Perentie Dreaming and has the same cultural significance as a church. The rock formation stands out like a massive shark fin which appears to be the backdrop to a natural amphitheatre. You could well imagine a massive corroboree happening here.



Greg keeping his distance from the "church" in case he is struck by lightning!



Corroboree Rock from the flank

We kept the most exciting bit of countryside till last – the Trepkina Gorge, another must see spot. We set off on the rim walk which again reminds visitors that the NT doesn't believe in unwarranted fences for the stupid as the track climbs up onto the rim of the gorge and follows it for a fair distance before dropping down onto the river bed and looping back to the start. The views of the country and the river bed from the rim are just outstanding.





This is half way up the track to the top, then the path follows the edge



Looking back to the start of the edge track – wow!



Descending to the river floor, the path follows the river bed back to the start point

On the way out of the gorge we stopped at one of the resident Ghost Gum which is supposedly over 300 years old – we could well believe it.



The little black blob on the right hand side of the trees base is Tracy who is standing up and hugging it!

Next was a quick visit to see the John Hayes Rock Hole as anything that promised water had our interest. A short 4WD drive and then walk took us to a small gorge with the rock hole – and water! After enjoying the view Greg, Vicki and I climbed to the top of the lookout which gave us a much better appreciation of the multitude of gorges.







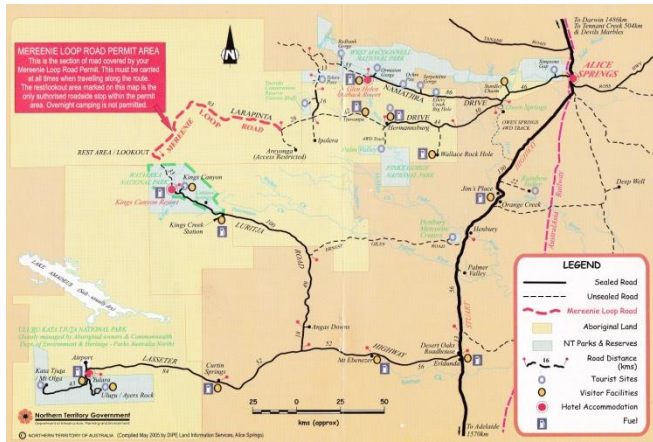
The view from the lookout. The rock hole is further around to the left



That's the famous "Gap" in the far distance

Feeling somewhat on the moral high ground after a bit of exercise we race back into Alice Springs to pick up the all important Mereenie Loop Pass. For a mere \$5 a car the pass allows us to drive from tomorrow's destination of Hermannsburg around to Kings Canyon. It's also the official permit required to travel across the aboriginal land. With permit in hand we then took our 5 o'clock drinks and nibbles to the memorial on top of the only hill in Alice Springs to enjoy the view and sunset. We also enjoyed providing encouragement to those hardly souls taking their day exercise by running up and down the hill.

That evening Greg was keen to check out Lasseter's Casino so we all walked down the street wearing our best bush clothes and presented ourselves at the entrance only to find no security and half the indigenous population happily enjoying the benefits of the casino – we felt overdressed! We checked out the restaurant just in case they offered a decent feed but found the offerings a tad limited and a bit pricy so we had drinks and then Greg led me on an investigation to suss out the layout were I got to learn all about electronic slot machines.



The Meeline Loop is the red dotted 35km dirt road



The "No Swimming" sign still cracks me up



The very flash memorial which has sections on all the confrontations and peacekeeping actions to date



The Gap itself isn't very long but by crikey it's high and steep

**Day 7** dawned and we said goodbye to Alice Springs and headed into the West MacDonnell Ranges. The first stop was just out of town at Simpsons Gap where we spotted our first Black-footed Rock Wallaby.





The view of the waterhole at the end of the gorge makes me think seriously about purchasing a wide angle lens



Just as we were leaving a very young rock-wallaby popped out of the rocks (Greg Klaassen pic)

Just a bit further on we came across a stretch of road which is always awe inspiring as the road runs parallel to the range.

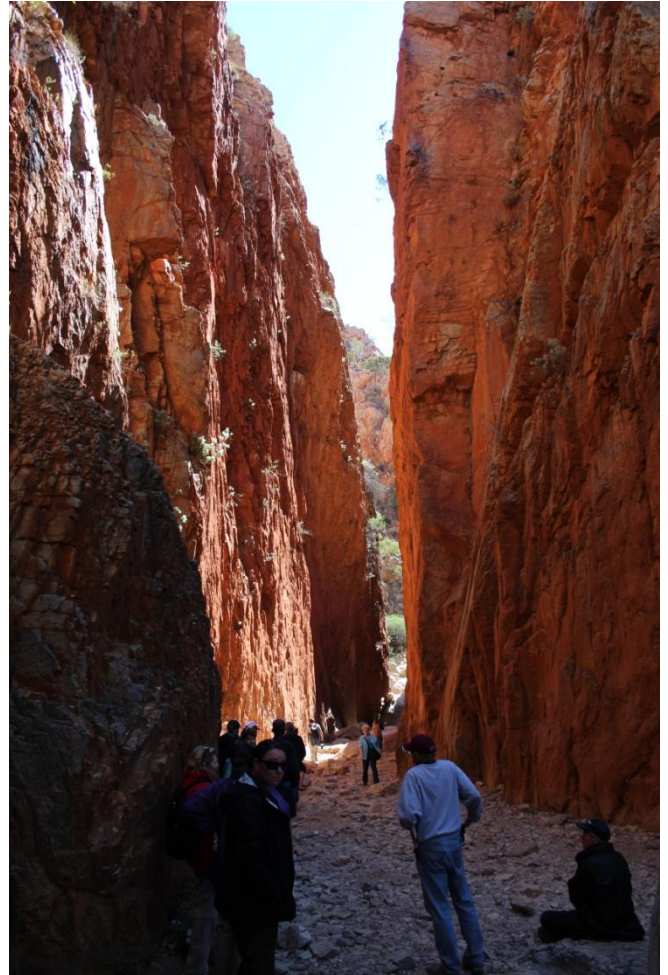


This does not do justice to the view



I will go to any length to get a better picture (Greg Klassen pic)

Next on the sighting list was the very impressive Stanley Chasm (Angkerle Atwatye) which also boasts a kiosk which has a proper fireplace and excellent coffee and is part of the Finke River tributary system.



Unfortunately there were so many people jammed in the chasm that it was pointless trying to get a decent picture

We then followed the Larapinta Drive to Hermansberg where Vicki and I got straight into their homemade apple strudel. The historic mission was originally set up by the Lutheran Missionaries, the Strehlow's and following its closure turned into a historic display. This was our second visit as it is quite a special place which gives you an appreciation of what indigenous people can achieve – without the influence of grog. We were shocked to hear that the historic precinct had only been reopened in April after being closed for years and the local indigenous council had invited the Lutheran Missionaries, who ran the community store, to once again run the historic precinct – and knock out the most delicious apple strudels ever!



The Strehlow's House and now cafe





The Old Church, which is back and operating. Just one of the many restored buildings that are filled with fascinating historical records



The path followed the steep sided river bed

The dirt road into the Finke Gorge National Park had a “4WD” only sign but the track wasn’t too bad even though we soon found ourselves going to 4WD before we got to the Palm Valley campground. The track followed the path of the Finke River which in its self is one mighty significant river which ends in a series of channels in the Simpson Desert. We did remark that NT 4WD only track signs – aren’t kidding! 3hrs for 18km. We pulled into the Palm Valley campground which had self registration for a mere \$6.60 a head which gave you free gas BBQ/stoves, hot showers and a very nice upmarket toilet block. That evening we were invited to attend a camp fire chat by the local Ranger who gave a very good brief on the red cabbage palms but sadly littered her brief with “yeah, you know” – I hadn’t had enough scotch to intercede with – “No, I don’t know, why don’t you actually tell us” – but I was sitting far too close to Vicki to risk it.



The walls were brilliant red with the odd white ghost gum and with plenty of nooks and cranny’s



And there is a adult wallaby, all fluffed up and waiting for the sun



Our bed for the night

**Day 8** after packing up we undertook the short but incredibly rugged 4WD track into Palm Valley which is the location of the rare and unique Red Cabbage Palms. We did the Arankaia Walk (2km, 1hr return, pronounced ung-kee-ab) so we could have a good look at the population of some 3,000 adult palms and hopefully spot the elusive Black-footed Rock Wallaby.

We then drove back to the Hermannsburg turnoff and onto the Mereenie Loop Road which turned out to be nothing short of a nightmare trip – even by our remote travel standards! The corrugations and potholes were never ending and to think we paid to take this track!



Lunch at the Red Centre Way intersection – now the loop driving starts



To make matters worse Greg got another flat tyre again on the “repaired” tyre and to add insult to injury while we were changing it a road train came past and even though the driver slowed down and kept well to the right side of the track we were covered in dust! Did I mention that we also snapped that problem wheel nut off while undoing the bloody thing!



Once again it was the back left tyre that ripped. The Klaassen’s were not happy campers – the backdrop was OK though!

The only and I do mean only redeeming feature of the Loop Road was a local traffic sign telling you to slow down for a particularly nasty spot!



We didn’t take any pictures of the “sign posts” but I found a picture in one of my 4WD magazines

By now the corrugations were starting to get on everyone’s nerves but morale surged when we came across a fantastic spot called Ginty’s Lookout which is a mere 10-15km from the Kings Canyon Resort. In hindsight we should have stayed there but the thought of hot showers had us push on.



The view from one of the many camping spots on Ginty’s Lookout

We pulled into the Resort to find it in full swing. Reception had four folk behind the desk and it was full on. We paid our \$20 per person per night for a spot in the wide open camping only spot – and to top it off we weren’t allowed to have any fires! Thankfully the showers were hot and

worked a treat. Hint for anyone intending to visit Kings Canyon – consider giving the loop track a miss, stay at Ginty’s Lookout, drive into the canyon then head to the Henbury Meteorite Craters or visa versa.



We found a spot well away form everyone else and set up camp

**Day 9** started with a near balmy morning and the sight of dingos trotting through the campground. The park had plenty of signs warning folk about the ever present dingo’s but we were astounded to see folk walking their small dogs after dark and even little toddlers being left alone.



One of the dingo’s on its morning patrol (Greg Klaassen pic)

Before heading off in the morning Greg was able to get the tyre repaired but was warned that the damage was significant and the repair could not be relied upon. Interestingly enough the hole was directly opposite the first hole which suggested an actual fault in the tyre. The plan was to see Kings Canyon which is about 5km from the resort and sits in the western edge of the George Gill Ranges within the Watarraka National Park. The George Hill Range is approximately 75km long, with the highest point being Carmichael’s Crag at 908m. The range is made up of Mereenie and Carmichael sandstone. Between the Carmichael sandstone is a thin layer of purple shale or mudstone which represents deposits laid down when the environment was changing from shallow marine (Carmichael) to an inland dune field, in which there were rivers and lakes (Mereenie).





Yep, that's the start of the Rim Walk – suck it up and start climbing!



When we got to the top, this little guy (possibly a species of Military Dragon) appeared in amongst a group of panting climbers



The twisted shape of the tree trunks intrigued me

The canyon features ancient sandstone walls rising up 100m to a plateau of rocky domes. We particularly wanted to do the Kings Canyon Rim Walk which is a 6km loop and takes about 3-4hrs to climb/walk. The walk dose start with a very steep climb to the top of the canyon but some hard working buggers built some great steps which made it easier on the feet – but not on the lungs. Of note is that the walk is closed during the hotter summer months (Sep-May) when it does become a tad life threatening.



Vicki is sitting about 10m from the cliff edge and wouldn't go any closer



Yep, their Cycad Palms in amongst the rocky domes



None of this whossy OH&S stuff here – if your silly enough to go over the edge the planet is better off without you.

A neat stop on the way was a sign to Cotterill's Lookout. Apparently a bloke by the name of Jack Cotterill, his son Jim



and an aboriginal by the name of Leslie spotted this neat lookout and together they built a wooden bridge across the gap back in 1962. It subsequently fell down and was rebuilt in 1991. We followed the path until we found ourselves on the bridge and by crikey it was one nasty drop.



On the way to the lookout. Note Vicki's white knuckle grip on the railing



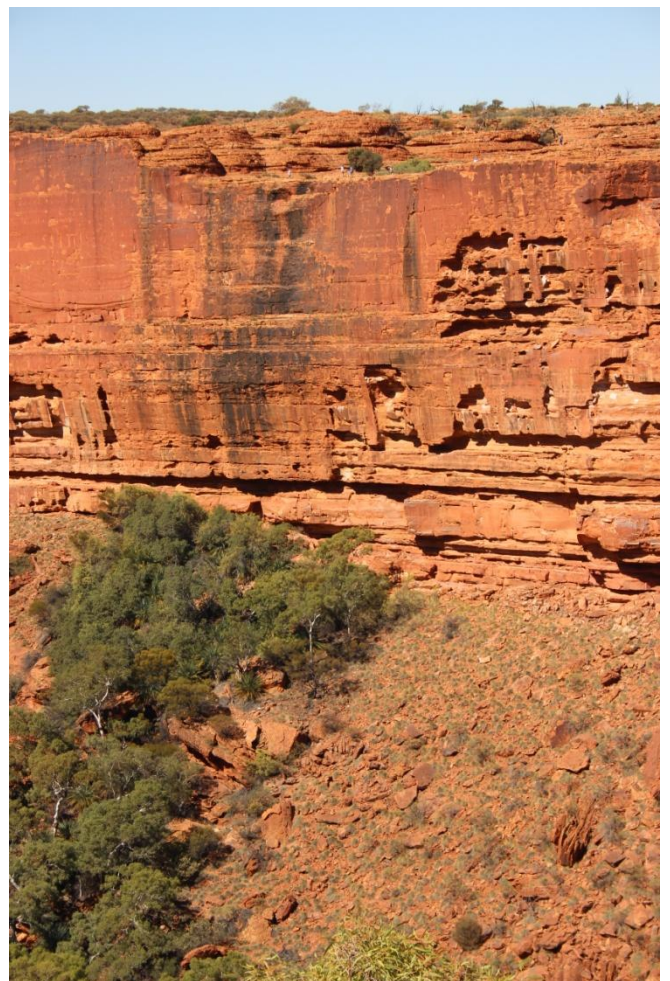
Maybe this is why.



Vicki on top of the lookout which gives you a clear view across and down the canyon



Simply spectacular.



Just to give you some idea of the size, the tiny blue dots on the top are people and the white marks on the face are hawk nesting sites

Further along we came to another side track to the Garden of Eden so we just had to check it out and found an



amazing water course and deep pool tucked into the cliff face.



Note the path on the left and the little blue dots – them's people



The tranquil Garden of Eden pool. We sat here in silence for sometime



The footbridge across the creek with the Garden of Eden track off to the bottom of the picture. Surprisingly most folk gave it a miss and continued up the staircases – sucks to be them!



Then all we had to do was walk down the ridge

When we got back to the car we discovered that the bread dough had expanded beyond the capacity of the container and blown its lid so we had a living blob growing in the car. Vicki had worked out this neat way to make small quantities of bread dough which she turned into lunch time bread sticks – outstandingly simple and yummy! We all had special memories of the walk. Vicki was chuffed to not only completing the entire walk but seeing the rocks that were once sand dunes and the hidden pools. Tracy couldn't get over the shear sandstone escarpments while I discovered that my body would "tingle" whenever I got too close to the cliff edges! The lovely day was soon spoilt when a zillion bush flies arrived the moment we arrived back at the resort! Up until then we had put up with the odd fly but a change in the weather had bought them out in huge numbers. Interesting fact that kinda helped matters was that the average bush fly only lives for 28 days and the female only lays twice!

Well that's all for the first part of the trip. The next bit gets us into the Simpson Desert.