Doing the Darling River Run

A good campsite at Tilpa Weir.

The free camp at Louth was a great overnight stop.

It was sparse pickings for these sheep down Menindee way.

Over another cattle grid and up another red sand hill on the Darling Run near Mildura

The river was a trickle downstream of the Tilpa Weir. Look closely for two cattle, two sheep and a kangaroo.

Not going far until the next flood.

The nearby Tilpa Weir was another great free camp that was tidy and met our needs just fine before moving on.

Down the road to Wilcannia, we were impressed by the many sandstone buildings and other reminders that this was once a very busy and prosperous port.

So far, the condition of the dirt roads had been excellent but we decided to pump up the tyres and take a side trip into Broken Hill.

It was so dry the highway was littered with roadkill and the Kangaroos were so exhausted they didn’t even flinch when you passed metres from them while feeding off the green pick on the side of the road, courtesy of 20mm of rain a couple of weeks earlier.

A new danger was the number of wide loads encountered on that stretch into Broken Hill.

When a 6.8m-wide load is coming your way, just get off the road and let it pass.

The drivers and pilots run the little courtesies that make it safer for us all.

With the Big Broken Hill horse racing event of the year, the Silver City Cup, only days away, we opted to stay out of town at Silvertown and use it as a base to explore the area.

The whole of Silvertown is very quiet and was the scene for the Mad Max movies and a few other Westerns.

The pub is quirky too and has great beers but the beer is a shiny one.

Head to the info centre in Silvertown for a great cuppa coffee that rivals many of the city cafes for quality.

Joining the Darling again at Menindee, we topped up the water tanks and headed out to the weir to explore the lakes and interconnecting waterways.

Plenty of vineyards with grapes were a new feature for us.

They mature earlier than down around Mildura and fetch good money, but everywhere away from the immediate river precinct was very dry.

In fact, this area was where we noticed an increase in the number of dead emus along the road as they are not coping well with the drought.

There is a great road from Menindee into Pooncarie that is a mix of dirt and bitumen as you follow the course of the river.

We camped free at the pub or shop and you get electricity and town water for $10 per night when camped on the Darling.

It was Shyne’s birthday, so an afternoon tea down on the river in the cool of the day was called for, followed by dinner at the Pooncarie pub.

Our host Josh kept us in good food and cold drink and it was an opportunity to have a great yarn with some of the local property owners who are all in the process of doing some destocking of sheep but nonetheless optimistic about the future and very much into the future.

They are on the verge of having tighter water restrictions from the river imposed and not too happy with the politicians and bureaucrats who make these decisions.

When you get to the Murray and see how much water gets taken out of there for irrigation and the sheer general waste of this vital resource, you really feel sorry for the poor cockles doing it rough along the Darling.

From our perspective, Pooncarie was a great base to head out to nearby Mungo National Park and do a tour of this area with an indigenous guide.

Lance did a great job of explaining the cultural history and it was interesting to take in the significance of the Mungo Man and Mungo Lady finds in that area.

The Homo sapiens remains found in this area in 1968 are the oldest un-covered anywhere in the world outside of the African continent and are estimated to be more than 40,000 years old.

While Pooncarie was an important port in the days of paddle steamers, it was the next stop Wentworth that was our destination.

A busy town on the NSW border with Victoria, it is right on the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers and a visit to the viewing tower at that junction to see the two rivers meet was a milestone for us and a moment worthy of celebration.

We ended the journey along the Darling in great awe of the skills of the old paddle steamer captains and now have a better appreciation of the value of the Darling and Murray River basins, which take up something like 14 per cent of this great country.

As we settled back into civilisation, we savoured our days of travel and friendship along the Darling and enjoyed taking in two days of ski boat racing along a 52km course from Wentworth in the Darling up to Mildura in the Murray.

It typified the diversity of cultures and lifestyle that co-exist today on our greatest river system.

Can the outdoors affect a family?

If all, here we are at the end of another year and the festive and holiday season is upon us. It is a time for family and to replenish the sanity tanks and enjoy what we all work so hard for.

My wife and I recently visited the Queensland Caravan and Camping Show with our son Garrett’s family and a few comments were made that really made me reflect on the effect of quality time spent with your children.

Garrett spoke of the importance of the bonding that occurs between parent and children when exploring the great outdoors.

He spoke of memories I’d taken for granted and what effect it had on his development and how he wanted his boys to have the same opportunities.

My wife dined my arm and whispered: “You know, your children really respect you.”

I thought about this and thought back to my childhood where I was exposed to the very same ideals.

I remember camping at Nooa, the Gold Coast and Stradbroke Island, fishing and crabbing through Moreton Bay and developing a love of being outdoors.

I grew up in an environment where I was never a runner and always encouraged to learn how to fish and think about what I was doing.

Tides, seasons and locational knowledge were passed down and the basic principles were taught.

Many lessons must have been lost these days because I brought my kids up with the very same principles.

I realised the amount of pride a parent feels when they see their offspring travelling the same path and achieving satisfaction out of simple things such as starting a fire, catching fish or crabs and of course enjoying nature.

That pride and love find its way into their hearts and the most rewarding things continue to happen as they grow.

My boys enjoyed sharing our adventures with their friends, some of whom weren’t really exposed to an outdoors style of life.

As years passed and all these young boys turned into young men, they continued to camp, fish, hunt and explore the outdoors.

Our trip would be planned and those same young men would say to Garrett: “Don’t forget to ask Chiefy.”

I’d be lying if I wasn’t chuffed to think the young bucks still had the respect and time for this old fella.

Now the young bucks are all married with young families, and as I said previously, Garrett’s comments on the importance of how the outdoors lifestyle builds family structure and provides so many memories saw me nudge the wife back and say: “You know babe, we’ve done all right.”

We’re coming into holiday season, so take the time to really make sure your kids know how important they are and help them enjoy the outdoors.

I believe this builds bonds forever.

I want to wish you and your families a very merry Christmas and a safe holiday season.

Thank you for reading this year.

Garrett with Wil and Jack heading over to Moreton Island.

Young Jack loves his fishing.

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