

A Darling River Run in the times of Covid

We finally got the chance to do The Darling River Run with water in the Darling – far from full, but at least some water – so we grabbed it. This was our “shakedown” trip with the new XLI. We were joined by two other couples, one towing another XLI, the other an XL.



The trip started at Smythesdale near Ballarat at a campsite owned by a local 4WD club. As the weather was typical Ballarat in June – cold, wet and windy - it was great to have a building with a fireplace and a shower and toilet available. We met up at the campsite and settled in for a few days of comparative luxury. This was the only place I put up the awning.



Once we left Smythesdale, we headed west to do the Yarriambiack Silo Art Tour, wandering along, looking at the painted silos and stopping along the way. Each set of silos is quite different to the others and all were painted by different artists.

The first silos were at Rupanyup, bearing portraits of a young man and woman from the district. The paintings are monochrome.



The second set of silos are at Sheep Hills. These are very colourful and show the faces of four local indigenous Australians.



Next comes the original set of silos at Brim. These are monochrome and show four local farmers. They were painted in 2015. We had thought to camp here in the Lions Club campground but, unfortunately, due to Covid, it was closed.



We continued to Beulah where the campground was also closed but the caretaker very kindly guided us to the free camp on the opposite bank of the weir where we settled in for the night.

Next morning, we drove to Rosebery where the next silos are located. The silos show a young local female farmer with a sheep and a male farmer with his horse. The work was completed in 2017.

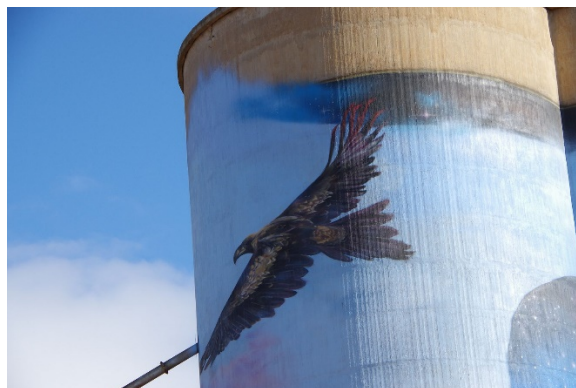


We then drove on to Hopetoun to check out the Lake Lascelles free camp which, confusingly, is in Hopetoun, not the neighbouring town of Lascelles, 26 kms away.

Next came the Lascelles silos which feature painted images of a couple of local farmers, one female, one male. These are monochrome again.



Next we detoured to Sea Lake to see their silos which are not part of the Yarriambiack Shire series. These are extremely fanciful and colourful, featuring a young girl on a swing as the main character, accompanied by many animals.





We then headed to Patchewollock to see the last of the silos on the official tour. These feature a young local farmer standing next to a tree. They were painted in 2016.

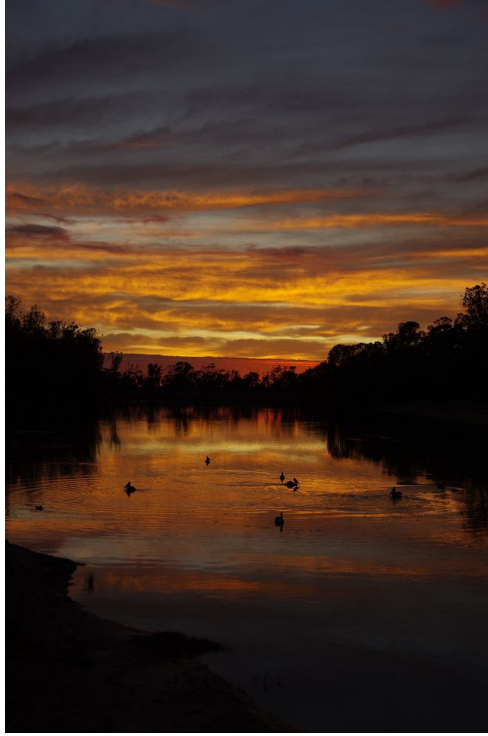


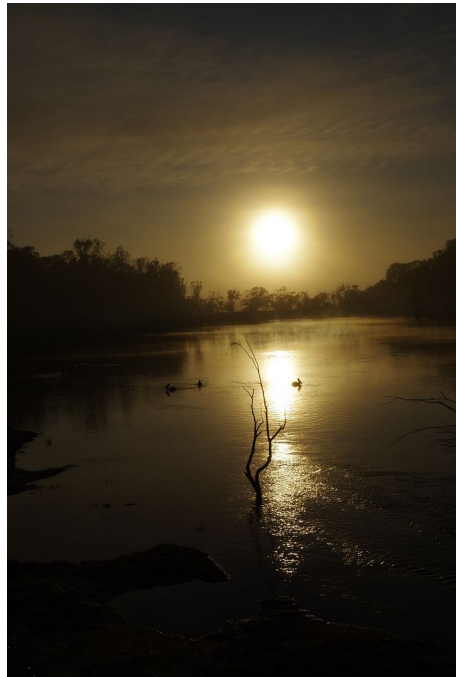
We had planned to drive west from Patchewollock into Wyperfeld National Park and then north into the Murray-Sunset National Park, but the recent rain put paid to that idea. The tracks tend to become muddy and are easily cut up.

Instead we headed for Oyen to fuel up and then proceeded to find a camping spot in the Murray-Kulkyne Park. With what turned out to be our “usual luck” we came upon a delightful spot on the banks of the Murray River.



It was so good we spent four nights there, just relaxing and enjoying the peace and quiet. I was up around 7:00 am each morning to watch the sunrise, all of which were superb with brilliant colours painting the sky and reflected in the glassy waters of the river. One morning was foggy, which added another dimension to the sunrise. The resident flock of pelicans made for a great foreground. Unfortunately, the sunsets happened behind a screen of tall trees and a sand dune.







During our stay I decided to have a go at a ham and cheese damper on our delightful fires. Boy, that red gum burns well. It turned out well if a little doughy in the middle. There were no leftovers, so that is a good sign!



We reluctantly left this camp to head off to the start of The Darling River Run, upstream version. We drove as close as we could to the Murray River, following the Kulkynne Way to Red Cliffs where we joined the Calder Highway to Mildura. We hit the shops in Mildura to stock up before driving to Wentworth where we had lunch at Junction Park which is appropriately at the junction of the Darling and Murray Rivers - the ideal place to start a Darling River Run.





From here we set off along the east bank of the Darling to Pooncarie for the night. The convention seems to be to call them the east and west bank even though most of the time they are more like the north bank and south bank. So, I will call them the east/south bank and the west/north bank.

We drove past the turn off to Lake Mungo which, unfortunately, was closed. It has since reopened of course. One day I will get to Lake Mungo...

We drove through Pooncarie to the local free camp. Unfortunately, it was packed! There must have been 20 or 30 vans crammed in there. We simply did a lap and drove back through town to a great spot right on the Darling River's bank which we shared with a motor home. Much better.

The reflections in the river in the morning were beautiful.





We continued along the east/south bank to Menindee where we did a sightseeing tour of the available camping options. We started at the Kinchega National Park, traversing a section of the River Drive. These sites were good but have a lot of overhanging Red Gum branches.

And we all know what can happen if you park under a tree, especially a River Red Gum:



I reckon the owner needed clean undies after that! The photo is not from our trip, but is a salient reminder...

We next drove to the Weir free camps via the shores of Lake Pamamaroo and the Bourke and Wills Depot Camp. The weir camps were utterly uninspiring and the Bourke and Wills Depot is large and dusty and popular with large caravans.

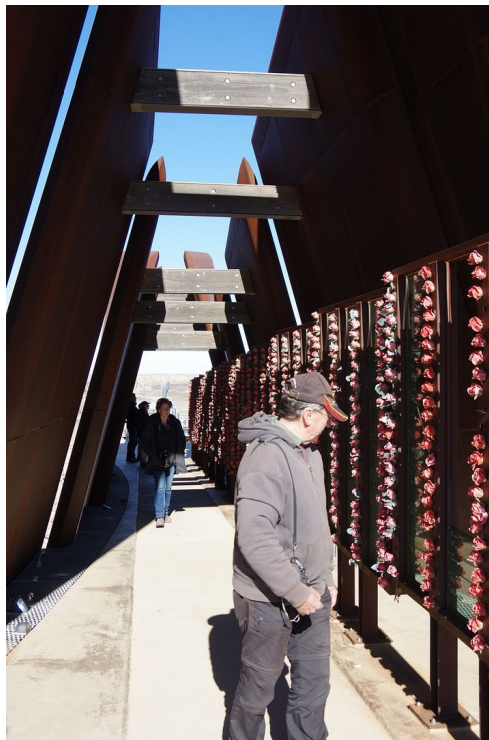
We settled on a lovely patch of the south eastern shore of Lake Pamamaroo shore with absolute water frontage. We could easily walk over the levee bank to use the toilets at the Bourke and Wills Depot – score! Sitting at the campfire on the lake shore, watching the sun set over the lake was a popular pastime.





We decided to do a day trip to Broken Hill from here to check out the Line of Load Memorial to miners killed at Broken Hill. Interestingly, Lake Pamamaroo was full but the main Menindee Lake was completely empty.

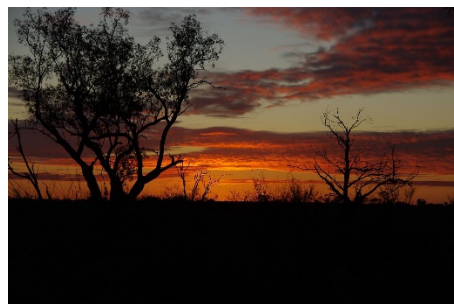
Each of these flowers represents a miner killed at Broken Hill while working:



We headed off from Menindee along the east/south road towards Wilcannia. This dirt road was in good condition and we wandered slowly along at around 70 km/h, looking for wheel tracks heading off towards the riverbank. We investigated quite a few and either had morning tea or stayed for a night at a few of them. Some days we drove an exhausting 30 kms before finding another lovely spot on the riverbank we just had to stay at for a

night... We had no trouble finding a spot large enough for three Crossovers though I did have to do some extensive pruning of the lignum to avoid excessive pinstriping of cars and Crossovers at one of them. Only once did we have anyone else come to a campsite we were on. We offered to share but they decided to head off and find their own little slice of heaven.

At one of the camps a batch of excellent scones were made in Bedourie. Jam and UHT cream appeared for all directions. Oh, how we suffered...







We finally arrived at Wilcannia to find a sign on the town limits saying, “Do Not Stop Unless Absolutely Essential”. So much for the welcoming mat. It is understandable, given that it is an isolated community composed of 80% indigenous residents. We did drive in to fill up at the service station and to drive the historical tour of the beautiful old sandstone buildings.

We stayed at Warrawong Station just south of town. Here you can camp near the toilet/shower/laundry block on grass or wander off across the station and pick a spot anywhere. We did a quick wander but headed back to three sites in a row on the grass. The washing machines were given a good workout, as were the showers.



From Wilcannia we continued along the east/south road towards Tilpa. We dropped in to Coach and Horses Campground along the way to have a look and have morning tea. It is a good campsite with excellent toilets and free gas BBQs. We continued along the road to find ourselves a nice spot on the riverbank to stay the night.

We drove to Tilpa and took the obligatory photo of the Three Amigos parked outside the hotel. We checked out the small war memorial as it is the only one in the country which has Harry Harbord “Beaker” Morant’s name on it under the Boer War. Well done, Tilpa!





We continued to Trilby Station, this time taking the west/north road, and were relieved to get the last riverside campsite, called "Mills". As we drove to our site we passed another Crossover so I decided to go back later and invite the owners over for Sundowners, an offer they accepted. We spent two nights at Trilby. We visited the adjacent Dunlop Station next morning for the tour which was really interesting, and then followed the Mud Map Tour to the abandoned homestead on Trilby. The homestead was fascinating – the owners literally walked out, leaving everything in place.



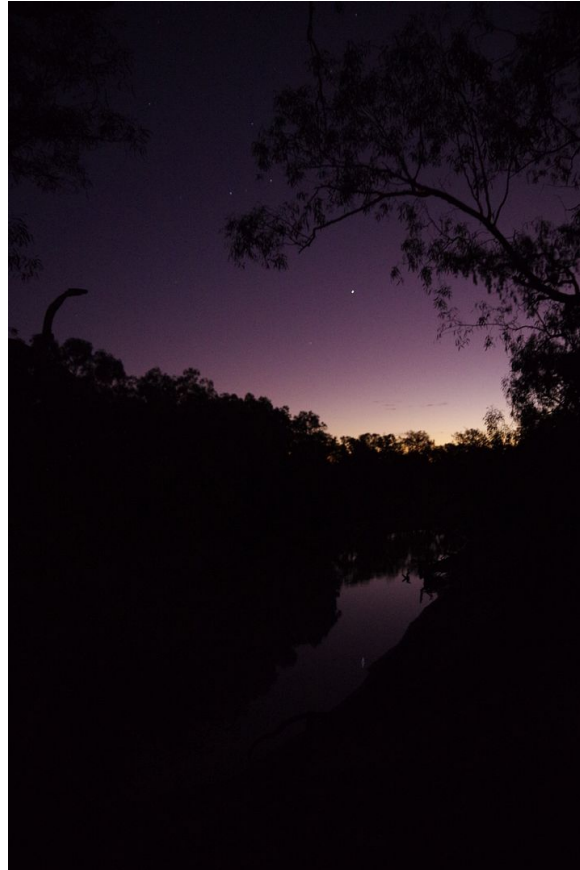


On the way back to Trilby we came across a large flock of Major Mitchell Cockatoos, the first I had seen in the wild. They really are beautiful birds – and a pack of clowns.



I made a batch of ice cream that afternoon and tucked it away in the freezer to set.





We left Trilby for the short drive to Louth to see the famous gravestone. It certainly stands out! It was erected by the town's founder to one of his wives - must have been his favourite! - and the sun reflects off the Celtic cross on the top onto the front door of his house on the anniversary of her death. We assume the other wives are buried somewhere inside the low fence...





We crossed back to the east/south side to drive to Gundabooka National Park. We checked out the main campground but were unimpressed, so we headed back to the river to look at the Yanda Campground. Along the way we passed another abandoned homestead, this one inside the park. There were a couple of old cars in the shed, one with a very aerodynamic - if rather ineffective - bull bar.





Yanda was much better, despite the bollards. There are only four sites around the outside of the loop, but a gap in the bollards allows you to set up in the large area in the middle. The site has toilets and gas BBQs but is a little distance from the riverbank.



Under the shelter over the BBQ we discovered some beautiful “designer” martin nests. They had been made out of different colours of mud in bands for a striking effect.





That night the BBQs were given a workout cooking dinner and then we ate some of my ice cream.

From Yanda we drove to Bourke to hit the supermarket and have a look around the town. After lunch at the old wharf area we headed to North Bourke and Mays Bend, a popular free camp. The best spots at the main camp were taken so I said I would do a wander around the bush tracks to see what I could find, XLI in tow. Some tracks were dead ends because of low branches or nasty dips/washouts, but after a few interesting 3 point turns I discovered a track heading off upstream a little way from the riverbank. I followed it for a while to discover a very nice spot which had been snaffled but took a turn off onto a rough little track that came to a magnificent spot on the riverbank. I called the others and gave convoluted directions on how to find us. They arrived and agreed that this was the spot for a Vista Village.



We stayed a few nights as it was such a beautiful spot. One night there was a pork roast cooked in the Bedourie and I had a go at a Chocolate Self Saucing Pudding in the camp oven. Both were raging successes. It turned out my pudding fed six that night and four a few days later. Nothing exceeds like excess!

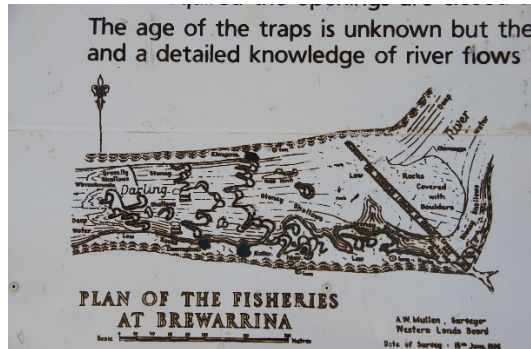


That was the chocolate pudding, not the pork roast.



We regretfully left Mays Bend and headed off along the east/south road to Brewarrina, known as "Bre" to the locals. We viewed the Fish Traps – an amazing feat of indigenous engineering, claimed to be 40,000 years old and the oldest human infrastructure in the world. There may be a few other contenders there....





We then set off to 4 Mile Camp, a few kilometres out of Brewarrina, for the night. We did a lap of the camp and finally selected a spot on the river bank for the night. There were lots of vans and campers there, but people spread out and kept the noise down – well, most of them... There are toilets and cold showers at the entrance, but most people camp further along the riverbank, as did we.

Next morning, we headed off along the west/north road to Walgett and on to Lightning Ridge. We decided to stay at Lorne Station, which is just on the southern edge of the town. It has showers and toilets and a huge unpowered area of dust to choose from. Lightning Ridge surprised us with its size and facilities. We had a great meal at an Italian restaurant – The Piccolo Italian Restaurant - and did some shopping at the supermarket. The lure of the opal shops was too much for some... In the main street I spotted a bicycle with more radios than most emergency services vehicles! There are four radios I counted on the bike's handlebars.





Here we finally split up the Three Amigos. One couple decided to return to the great campsite at Mays Bend to wait for the Queensland Border to open while the other couple and the Numb Thumbs decided to start back towards “Sicktoria”.

We drove back to Walgett and continued south to Coonamble and Gulargambone, joining the Newell Highway at Gilgandra.

Some water tank art along the way:





We drove south along the Newell to Eumungerie free camp for the night. It is a great free camp – off the highway, has a friendly, onsite caretaker, clean toilet block with cold showers and a huge, flat area to set up on. I would advise that you do not eat at the pub, however...



We had seen a sign on the highway for the Narromine Aviation Museum, so we decided to give it a go. The museum is small but very well laid out and interesting. Buzz Aldrin, the lunar astronaut, visited the museum years ago and saw the full size, flying replica of the Wright Brothers “Flyer”. He was told that a local had actually flown it on the airstrip for 500 metres, replicating the Wright Brothers first flight. His response was, “Now that is something to brag about – but I’d rather fly to the moon than fly that!” We also may have visited the bakery/coffee shop...





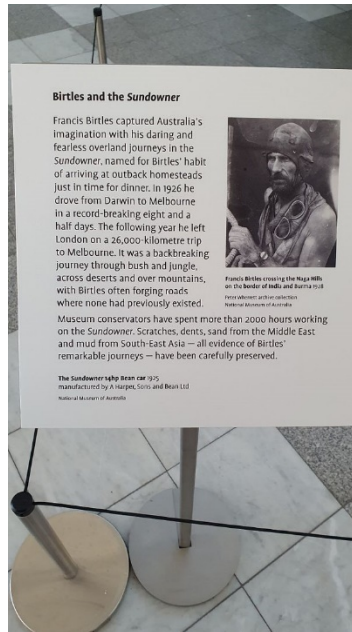
After Narromine we drove down to Forbes for lunch then on to Cowra for the night, setting up camp at the Showgrounds campsite. This has a good toilet/shower block and plenty of flat, grassed space. The morning was very foggy so it was a slow drive towards Canberra until we crossed a divide and left the fog behind.



The others continued on to the Monaro Highway while we stopped in Canberra, staying at EPIC in the north of Canberra for a couple of nights to visit some friends.

We left Canberra after spending some time in the National Museum looking at the Endeavour Voyage Exhibition and a few other things. One of my favourite things is the "Sundowner", Francis Bortles car. In 1927 he drove it 26,000 kms from London to Melbourne, open car with a magnificent 18 horse power and straight through exhaust. I prefer my enclosed Discovery 5 with 225 kW - which is 300 horse power. They built them tough in those days - cars and people!





We then headed out to the Hume Highway and on towards Melbourne. We spent the night at a small campground with no facilities just out of Chiltern called Tuan Campground. Next morning it was announced that the New South Wales / Victoria Border was closing.



The morning was cold and foggy so we slowly drove down the Hume Highway, the fog finally lifting at Glenrowan to a glorious, sunny day. As we got closer to Melbourne the cloud increased and we arrived home to an overcast, cold day.

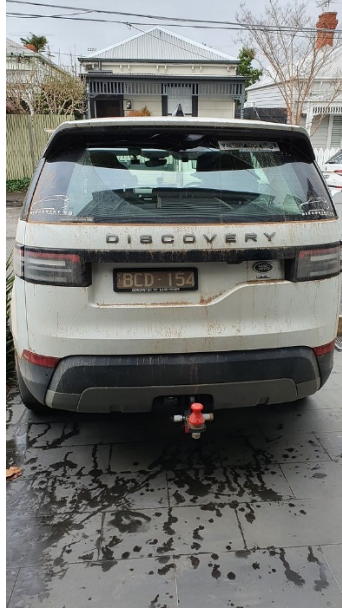
Now to unpack and clean up the XLI ready for its first service.



Designer mud:



Plus, I better clean the car:



Just a few million dead mosquitos:



Once home it was announced that Sicktoria was going back into a six week lockdown...

Cheers

Numb Thumbs 🙄