

Bucket List Flyaway

Dave Laughton

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2017

You've probably heard about FIKI (Flight Into Known Ice), but on day one we discovered DIKI (Driving Into Known Ice), at least that's what it felt like as we drove the Arkaroola Ridge Top Tour. Never been so happy to get into a warm bar, despite the spectacular scenery and camaraderie the afternoon of Day 1 provided.

Sadly two of our number had failed to show. Col & Brita were hoping to catch up in a few days after Brita's recovery from a tummy wog, as were Leigh & Tracy who had landed in the middle of nowhere on a station strip between Mildura and Arkaroola with issues (not of a personal nature). Not quite according to plan, but not the end of the world, yet.

In the lead up to the trip some irreverent individuals conspired to nominate a nickname for each crew. The eleven starters were:

| | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| John & Jan Pullen | PA-28-181 Archer | "Airbus" |
| Geoff & Gayle Beutel | PA-28-180 Cherokee | |
| Ian Tucker and Vicky Giles | PA-28R-200 Arrow | "Snowbirds" |
| Dave & Vicki Ind | PA-32R-301T Saratoga | "Sparky" |
| Steve Mathers and Sharon Maloney | PA-34-200 Seneca | |
| Barry & Susan McCabe | PA-28-235 Pathfinder | "Ice Man" |
| Dave Long & Cath Lincoln | PA-28-180 Archer | "Doc" |
| Greg & Toni Morris | PA-32R-300 Lance | "Clown" |
| Colin & Brita Bruce | PA-28-181 Archer | "Dreamliner" |
| Leigh & Tracy Barling | PA-28R-301T Arrow | "Maverick" |
| Dave Laughton & Rae Percival | PA-46R-350T Matrix | "Skipper" |

Geoff & Gayle and Steve & Sharon, being flyaway virgins, missed out on being nicknamed, but they won't get away with it next time.

Day 2, all thawed out and off in various directions to a common destination, William Creek. Some went north over yesterday's DIKI country, others to Leigh Creek for fuel and the rest direct to the newly refreshed 'Marree Man' which proved to be no challenge to find, unlike the recent past when nature had reclaimed him.

Not the most pleasant of flying days with the strong winds and bumpy ride persisting down low. From the 'Man' the old Ghan railway was evident, heading west through some low country with numerous long trestle bridges still standing, as were remnants of Curdimurka, one of the old railway towns replete with the original water tower. Not hard to see why the Ghan closed for months after heavy rain back in the good old days. Doc, using his acute vision, was able to clearly identify Black Swans and specific markings from 500'. Truly amazing.

The Painted Hills were next to appear, an extensive area of heavily eroded and remarkably coloured country, situated on Anna Creek Station, the largest in the world, and inaccessible to everyone except by air. Ain't we lucky!

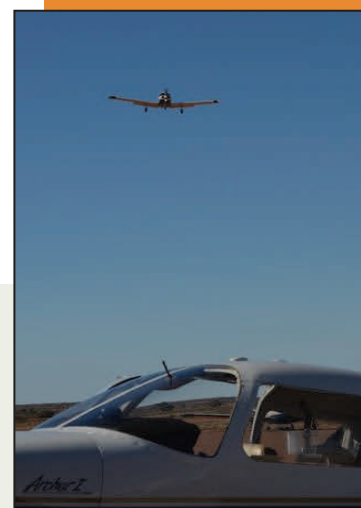
William Creek offered a challenging crosswind landing, unless you were smart enough to use the undocumented dirt strip on the other side of the road, as many did. The rest of us were glad no-one was close enough to score our landings, but at least no maintenance was required.



The Bucketeers, Arkaroola



Marree Man, SE of William Creek



A Piper on final for 21 on the other side of the highway, William Creek



'Cool' Bucketeers on the Ridgetop Tour, Arkaroola



The Painted Hills, SW of William Creek

Being close to Woomera Rocket Range has enabled a collection of 'Space Junk' to accumulate and take pride of place in the middle of town, a town which is now owned in its entirety by Trevor Wright who arrived to start an air charter operation many years ago and progressively acquired the camp ground and then the Pub by default. Apart from the Air Charter buildings there's not much else there.

One of the truly colourful characters of the Outback, Trev took great delight in delivering a pre-dinner chat about the history of the place and the nature of his extensive operation. The following morning he proudly showed off his new toy, a Cessna Caravan, before seeing us on our way north.

Meantime, no good news from our two delayed starters. Dreamliner (Col this time) went down on Saturday night as they were packing but hoped to catch up a couple of days on. Maverick made it back to Broken Hill and was waiting on parts, also expecting to catch up in a day or two.

Day 3 over Lake Eyre, sadly without water but still a stunning sight and on up the western side where the Warburton Groove stands out vividly as it leads back to one of the main inflows to the Lake, the Warburton River. There was still some water in the river and quite a lot of bird life, principally Pelicans. It's always amazed me as to how they come to be sitting around down Adelaide way and one day decide to head off into the desert hoping to find water. It continues to amaze me, given they are so smart, why they hang on as the water all around dries up. One can only hope they feed well as fish are concentrated into smaller and smaller pools before finally making a sprint back to the sea.



Up past the Warburton Groove

Finally we're over Channel Country, and not disappointed as many channels still hold water and the extent of Goyder Lagoon is apparent by the relatively green expanse nestled in the drier desert dunes to the west and the stonier Strzelecki Desert to the east. This is where the Diamantina River, which starts its journey to the NW of Winton before creeping down over many months, ends, occasionally reaching Lake Eyre before drying up, an epic journey and an epic sight if you ever get the opportunity to see it.



'Bucketeers', Birdsville

Red sand hills appear to our left as we approach Birdsville, the Eastern reaches of the Simpson Desert in this area, and the location of our sunset gathering on Big Red, one of the longest sandhills in the Simpson. As always, Kylie from Desert Edge Tours put on a good outing with a short tour of the town combined with a bit of its history before heading west in time for drinks and nibbles on top of Big Red to watch another wonderful day come to a close. But of course the day couldn't finish before the mandatory drink in the bar of the Birdsville Hotel, so it didn't.

The two recalcitrants had no good news for us, but both still held the fading hope of catching up. Fingers crossed. They were being missed.

Day 4 and a late change of plan. The wonders of Facebook resulted in Sharon discovering that a friend of hers who has a mobile pizza truck, attending all of the rodeos and picnic races in western Queensland over a 3 month period each year, just happened to be in Boulia today and with a bit of arm twisting agreed to fire up the oven and feed us all lunch. Worked a treat with everyone sitting on the grass under the trees on the main street plantation, being gawked at by the occasional passing caravanner. Doesn't get much better than that, especially as we'd all just enjoyed the Min Min Light Experience, left a few dollars in town and prepared to move on after visiting the excellent Stone House local museum.

Soon after leaving Boulia the country starts to change quite markedly as we headed out over the eastern reaches of the Barkly Tableland and its numerous small mines before arriving at Cloncurry for the evening, and a superb meal at our motel.

Day 5 and half decided to head off for Adel's Grove early whilst the rest did a quick trip to the John Flynn Museum, all aiming in to get to Adel's Grove in time for an early afternoon trip to Lawn Hill Gorge. The smart ones elected to tour the gorge on a small boat, whilst the others took to the two man canoes. Boaties saw a croc. Paddlers are glad they didn't, especially the Snowbirds who ably demonstrated why they should stick to flying by exhibiting a classic slapstick manoeuvre which unfolded in slow motion and ended up with both in the drink. Lucky it wasn't cold or deep, and a miracle that neither phone nor camera ended up as wet as the crew. Curiously all observers and players had a differing view of the sequence of events, but all agreed it was bloody funny!



The Snowbirds pretending to be ducks

Again no good news from the absentees. Col was still crook and the catching up getting so hard as to make it not worthwhile, so they scratched. Maverick's part hadn't arrived, and no-one could say where it was. Getting desperate.

Day 6 and a leisurely start for our short run up to the Gulf of Carpentaria near Burketown then across the bottom of the Gulf to Karumba. Great plan, but the usual amazing vista of the many rivers snaking their way across salt pan country to the ultra shallow edge of the Gulf was somewhat tarnished by the strong wind taking advantage of the dry conditions and whipping up a cloud of salty dust which looked a lot like sea mist as we approached. Upon closer inspection it turned out to be both as the dust merged into the over water mist, all in all presenting the country in a lesser state than is normal. Pity, but still pretty impressive.



The Gulf, with dust and sea haze

The afternoon was dominated by Sparky's horse running in some flash race down south. A brace of wannabe punters descended on the pub, home of the TAB in Karumba. Bets were duly placed and incredibly the nag got up. Naturally this was cause for celebration, and with wallets bulging that's what happened, and kept on happening. The reason given by the celebrants is that they took so much money out of the TAB till they virtually broke it, and the only way to save the whole operation was by re-investing the winnings in alcohol. Seems they were entirely successful.



Happy punters, Karumba

Maverick retired hurt and rightly p****ed off about the whole exercise, exacerbated by having to spend 5 nights in Broken Hill, four more than any reasonable person should have to endure (make that 5 if you've been before, which they had).

Day 7 and a call to the refueller in Normanton to arrange a Saturday callout resulted in advice that delays should be expected due to an air-sea search which was in progress, a number of aircraft with priority being involved. Despite low expectations the refueller busted a gut and juggled his time to keep everyone pretty happy. While waiting their turn several of our crews were treated to an on board tour of the Government Emergency Services Challenger jet.

Sadly I wasn't one of them but by all accounts it was an impressive bit of kit - our taxes at work. Good news is that, despite the person being searched for being extremely overdue when he was located, it all resulted in a happy ending. Quite a good outcome given they were expecting to find a body.



Enjoying a sunset dinner, Karumba

Finally we all arrived at Forsyth, the nearest airport to Cobbold Gorge, our home for the next two nights and located about 45 km away. Unbeknown to us, the Forsyth pub had been

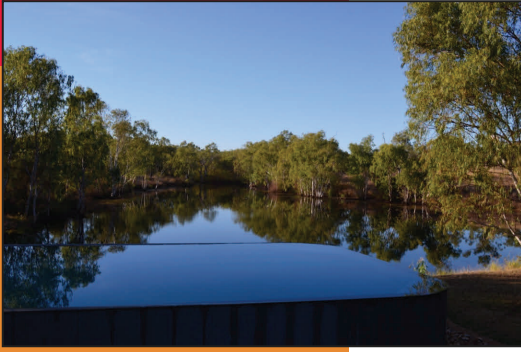
recently refurbished and provided a great location for a very nice lunch while we waited for our pickup bus. Parking at Forsyth airstrip was at a premium as the photo shows, and whilst being a thorough gentleman and offering to close the gate after the bus had exited the airport, expecting the bus to then stop and pick him up, Clown was left gazing after the receding visage of the bus as it went on its merry way. Thankfully there was a second pickup planned and needless to say Greg was a little reticent about offering his gate closing services second time around without establishing his expectations quite clearly. Bus driver proved to be a quick learner.



The Pipers at Forsyth airstrip

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Settled into our accommodation by mid-afternoon. It was time to chill out and what a great place to do just that. An infinity pool with a dam and natural bushland as a backdrop, a bar in the opposite direction together with beautifully warm weather made for a leisurely afternoon leading into the evening meal enjoyed by all.



Infinity pool above the river, Cobbold Gorge

Day 8 allowed a morning free to explore the environs with several self guided walks on offer, the majority taking advantage of them to get a bit of exercise before heading off on the Gorge tour in the afternoon. Difficult to effectively describe the Gorge, but suffice to say that it's so narrow that they've had to have special narrow electric powered punts made to sneak along the narrow chasm. Well worth a couple of days if ever you're up that way.

Day 9 and our shortest flight lay ahead, only 64 nm to Undara. A few elected an early start in order to do a bit of extra-curricular near daybreak flying in a chopper over this unforgiving but striking landscape; another great way to waste some money.

Preparing to leave Forsayth we saw a T-tail Lance land, and to some of the longer serving Bucketees the colour scheme looked familiar. Lo and behold up rolls Cheryl Arentz doing a charter (as she often does), amazed to see the normally deserted airstrip awash with Pipers. Our encounter was brief as she had paying passengers to look after and we had flying to be done, having to get to Undara in time for lunch and an early afternoon Lava Tube tour, all of which was achieved in a timely manner.



Above Cobbold Gorge

One of the highlights of Undara is the accommodation we'd booked, a string of old QLD Rail carriages aligned like a train along an old wagon track and refurbished to provide very roomy and comfortable en suite room. Quite nostalgic to the old farts who clearly remember these relics being the norm for rail travel in their youth.

I won't attempt to describe the tube tour or their history, but can highly recommend this quite unique geographic feature as worth a visit. Unfortunately there were too many in our party to be able to join the sunset tour which culminates a bit after dark by visiting one of the huge caves, home to untold numbers of bats, to witness their mass departure whilst running the waiting gauntlet of snakes trying, and often succeeding, to take them mid flight as a dietary supplement.



Touring through the Cobbold Gorge

Day 10 was an early start for a bush breakfast, each of us sitting on a stump with a taller stump as our personal table. Wood fire BBQ bacon and eggs, Billy tea, toast being self made using a toasting fork over the embers of a fire all made for a good brekky, except for Vicki Ind bunging on a turn both because of the unnaturally early start (for her) and the discovery of bits of the bush in her tea.

Entertainment was provided watching some of the other guests trying to figure out the toasting process which was proving quite a challenge until the subtleties were politely explained by some of our motley crew.

Back to the airstrip and off to Shute Harbour, some going via Ingham for fuel and others with longer range going via Charters Towers. The Ingham mob tracked fairly well directly over Wallaman Falls, Australia's highest single drop falls at 879 ft. Sadly there was a bit of cloud around so the view was not as good as hoped, but still impressive for those lucky enough to be close enough.



A Piper practising a precautionary search, Undara

Ingham refueller wasn't expecting to be available due to urgent business off site, so decided we sounded trustworthy and told us where to find a key for the bowser, asking if we'd leave details of who took what so she could invoice us later. Real country hospitality, something the whole country could benefit from having a bit more of. It all proved unnecessary as she found someone to stand in, but very nice just the same.

On down the coast, some direct over Townsville and others out over the North of Magnetic Island due to traffic, but all interesting to see. From there down the coast to the Whitsundays where the Charters Towers mob rejoined the entourage and some of us did a lap out around the Whitsunday Islands, Hayman and Hook Islands, Whitehaven Beach, Hamilton Island etc and on into the unusually situated Shute Harbour airport with interesting circuit joining procedures and approaches.

Two surprises awaited us on arrival. First was the level of service. Seems new owners took over a couple of months ago and boy, have they got things right. Four ground staff arrived in mini bus, ute and golf buggy to guide us to parking, help to push planes back, carry our bags to the vehicle and transport us back up to the terminal and airport cafe for lunch.

The second and bigger surprise was to see Maverick himself standing there grinning from ear to ear and welcoming us. Having missed the whole trip Leigh & Tracy decided to rescue something from the ashes and flew up commercially to join us for the last two nights. That was fantastic.

Day 11 and a complete change of transport mode and pace. A chance comment whilst talking to a couple of sailing friends a few months ago resulted in them offering to take all of us out for a day's sailing on their 60' catamaran, their home for the past nine years. Co-pilots rallied and stocked up on food and drinks and by 0900 all 20 of us were boarding the boat. Hard to believe that a yacht with two residents could accommodate 22 people, and with space to spare at that. Martyn & Jude were fantastic hosts giving us the run of their yacht for the day as we headed off under sail for Black Island, just south of Hayman. Anchored up for lunch. Swimming, eating, drinking, and sunning all were carried on with enthusiasm until time to head for home under a steady but increasing beam wind which carried us along at nearly 10 knots. At least Doc was no longer the slowest means of transport for the trip.

Reluctantly the sailing day came to a close in the late afternoon as Jude skilfully manoeuvred the 26 tonne boat into its berth with 20 other pairs of eyes watching for the slightest slip, something akin to greasing a landing in front of a critical crowd of on-lookers.

Finally the day, and flyaway, drew to a close with our last dinner together where platitudes etc abounded, as did our usual raucous presence delivered in every venue we visited. A special vote of thanks to Marty & Jude, our dinner guests for the evening, was humbly accepted.

Day 12, and a few things to tidy up before Sparky, Doc and Skip headed north to the Torres Strait and the rest planned their various routes and departures for home, all of us wishing there were a few more days still to go, having had such a great time.

The tidying up involved taking Leigh & Tracy and Marty & Jude for a quick lap of the islands, a small reward to each couple for their respective efforts, and what a great day for it it proved to be.

And until the next trip, that's it!

Finally, if anyone is curious as to specifics of strips, fuel, accommodation, track, geographic features, attractions or any other insight into the region feel free to call and we'd be

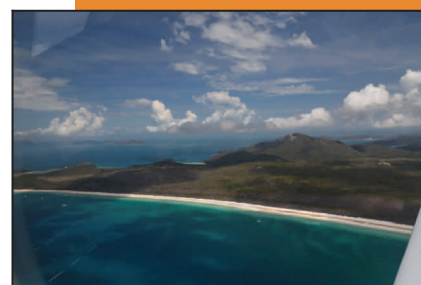
happy to share whatever knowledge we have. It's a wonderful part of our vast country and a must for any aviator to visit at least once before hanging up the goggles.

A sincere thanks from Rae and I to all 'Bucketeers' for going with the flow and making the task of organising and running the trip a very enjoyable one. We'd happily do it all again with the same crew, or a completely new batch.

Rae & Dave (Skipper)
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Hill Inlet, Whitsunday Island



Whitehaven Beach, Whitsunday Island



Bucketeers getting some sun aboard the Cat

