

# Nor'Q-87

## *Murphy's Revenge*

A four-wheel-drive  
adventure to North  
Queensland in 1987  
suffers unique challenges

Terry Bibbo

# Table of Contents

Introduction

Itinerary

Distances Travelled (km)

The Beginning

The \$5.00 Breakfast

Cairns and Surrounds

Cairns - Cooktown – Cairns, 681km

Monday was the day Murphy emerged from hiding.

Murphy was up earlier than we were

Cairns - Drumduff Station, 444km

Thursday: nothing went wrong

Drumduff Station – Edward River, 320km

Two out of three river crossings

Murphy was starting to enjoy himself by now

Edward River – Bamboo Station, 270km

Bamboo Station

Bamboo Station – Weipa, 350 km

Murphy rests for a while

Weipa – Moreton Telegraph Station, 132km

Moreton Telegraph Station – Bamaga, 233km

Monday was really Murphy's day

Cape York

A day of truth

Thursday Island and Hammond Island

Murphy got at me again on Hammond Island

Bamaga – Moreton, 241km

A day to go down in Murphy history

Moreton – Coen, 182km

Coen – Laura, 247km

Laura – Cairns, 308 km

Murphy, Vegemite and plum jam

North Queensland Tour — August and September 1984

Newsletters For The North Queensland Safari

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NOR'Q-87

*Murphy's Revenge*

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*“What can go wrong, will,”* Murphy.

*“Murphy was an optimist,”* Mrs Murphy.

To

Father Len Bibo, 1928 – 2009, Priest of the Diocese of Cairns.



## Introduction

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What was conceived in 1984 as a family safari to North Queensland over the month of August 1987, and at one stage looked like having six vehicles and 14 people taking part, by August 1987 had degenerated to three vehicles and 6 people.

The write up of the 1984 trip is included as one chapter of this publication, (see page [35](#)) as are the four newsletters (pages [39](#), [41](#), [43](#) and [45](#)), which provide some information about the organisation and evolution of the 1987 trip.

Final starters were Father Len Bibo, based in Cairns, Terry and Robert Bibo & Barry and Judith Runnstrom from Canberra, and Chris Bunt from Buxton. The aim was to go to Cape York, with extensive side trips to both the east and west coasts of the Cape York Peninsula and through the Lakefield National Park.

Chris has a theory that anyone should go to Cape York only once and, since I had been there in 1984, all the mischief Murphy had planned for this trip for six vehicles was visited on me for a) doing the trip twice, and b) not giving him all original six vehicles to work on.

The vehicles involved were: Len - Toyota diesel Land Cruiser tray top with covered cage; Barry - petrol Range Rover with the rear seat removed for storage space; and me, short wheel base diesel Nissan Patrol MQ with roof rack. The Toyota had a long-range 90-litre tank fitted as standard in addition to its regular tank. The Range Rover had two custom fitted extra tanks of 20 litres each. The Nissan had a replacement 160-litre tank and, since this took up all the room underneath, it had a spare tyre carrier mounted to the rear bumper/chassis.

In the weeks leading up to departure I had the fuel system checked and EDIC (electronic diesel injection control) motor serviced, new shock absorbers, new rear brakes, and the vehicle had only three weeks earlier been through the motor registry inspection. It was virtually guaranteed in top form. But then Murphy had plans of his own, and ways and means of executing them.

He did try to warn me, I think. My leave applications seem to have caused some confusion in the system, and took more than a reasonable amount of my time and effort to sort out. Then when people started pulling out of the



venture as the departure day approached, until only the hard core were left, I should have got the message.

Thus begins the saga of NOR-Q 87.

### Itinerary

Canberra - Brisbane - Cairns	24 - 28 July
Cairns and Surrounds	29 Jul - 02 Aug
Cairns - Cooktown - Cairns	03 - 05 Aug
Cairns - Chillagoe - Drumduff Station	06 - 09 Aug
Drumduff Station - Rutland Plains - Kowanyama - Edward River	10 - 11 Aug
Edward River - Strathgordon - Musgrave - Bamboo Station	12 - Aug
Bamboo Station	13 - Aug
Bamboo - Coen – Weipa	14 - 15 Aug
Weipa - Moreton Telegraph Station	16 - 17 Aug
Moreton Telegraph Station - Bramwell - Fruit Bat Falls - Bamaga	18 - 19 Aug
Cape York	20 - Aug
Thursday Island - Hammond Island	21 - Aug
Bamaga - Moreton Telegraph Station	22 - Aug
Moreton - Coen	23 - Aug

Coen - Laura	24 - Aug
Laura - Cairns	25 - Aug
Cairns - Blackwater - Brisbane - Canberra	29 Aug - 02 Sep

### **Distances Travelled (km)**

Canberra - Brisbane	1269
Brisbane -Cairns	1719
Cairns - Cooktown	323
Cooktown - Cairns	358
Cairns - Chillagoe	244
Chillagoe - Drumduff Station	254
Drumduff Station - Rutland Plains	167
Rutland Plains - Kowanyama	28
Kowanyama - Edward River	124
Edward River - Bamboo Station	271
Bamboo Station - Weipa	354
Weipa - Moreton Telegraph Station	132
Moreton Telegraph Station - Fruit Bat Falls	160

Fruit Bat Falls - Bamaga	109
Bamaga - Moreton Telegraph Station	241
Moreton Telegraph Station - Coen	182
Coen - Laura	247
Laura - Cairns	308
Cairns - Blackwater	1107
Blackwater - Brisbane	819
Brisbane - Canberra	1274

## The Beginning

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Robert, Chris and I left Canberra at 5.30pm on Friday 24 July, in the middle of winter when the average daily high temperature was around 10 Celsius and the nights down around minus 4. We drove in roughly three-hour shifts, moving from the driver's seat to the front passenger's to the rear seat for a sleep. The trip was uneventful, refuelling at Narrabri at 2.00am and arriving at Brisbane at 8.45am on the Saturday. We stayed with Tony and Val Bibb at Carina, and had a barbeque lunch to start the hospitality.

Everyone who was anyone was there. Tony, Val, Steve and Lilian with Sinead and Liam, Karen, Mike, and Jennie. And Bernard, Carmel and Tonia. Age must be taking its toll, and I was ready for a relatively early night. But Robert and Chris went off dancing with Karen that night. On Sunday they spent the day sailing with Mike, Jennie and friends while Tony, Val and I had a quiet day including an excellent lunch at the New Orleans restaurant and looking over a very changed Brisbane since I grew up there.

### The \$5.00 Breakfast

4.30am Monday 27th saw us on the road again. The most notable event of the day would have to be breakfast at Shaddy's Salad Bowl at Glenwood on the Bruce Highway. It is not an obtrusive place, and you could be excused for missing it, but its location happened to fit our hunger pangs and that's how we found it. For \$5 we got:

- 2 eggs
- 4 massive bacon rashers
- a pile of chips
- ½ slice of crumbed pineapple
- 1 banana fritter
- 2 savoury toast quarters
- 1 bubble and squeak patty
- 2 large slices of toast
- Vegemite and marmalade
- 1 bowl of papaw and passionfruit
- 1 cup of coffee
- 1 glass of orange juice.

Thoroughly recommended!!

After 12 hours on the road we set up for the night in a cabin at the Beach Caravan Park in Mackay and headed back into town for a counter tea. The original intention had been to sleep off the road somewhere, but the look of the sky as we were approaching Mackay compelled me to volunteer to pay for closed accommodation. Just as well. Sometime after dark it started to rain. And it rained, and it rained...

When we left at 4.10am next day it was still raining and seemed to be set in for forty days and nights. It was Chris's turn to drive. With a strange vehicle, in the dark and the pouring rain, it must have felt like being thrown in at the deep end. Fuel so far had been cheap at around 47 cents per litre, and the big tank meant we didn't have to refuel often. So we could afford to shop for the cheap prices at intervals and not have to take just whatever was offering.

Unfortunately cheap outlets became fewer as we neared Cairns, and we were finally forced to refuel at Innisfail at 54 c/l. We arrived in Cairns at 2.10pm on Tuesday 28 July and went straight to Len's unit at Carinya Lodge in Sheridan Street. Canberra to Cairns was 2995 kilometres. It took us 37 hours 15 minutes of time on the road including refuelling and eating stops. Robert and I slept at Len's, and Chris stayed with friends on the southern side of town.

### Cairns and Surrounds

Wednesday was taken up with local sight seeing, and a short swim at Trinity Beach where the box jellyfish were not yet a problem, and catching up on washing. Len had work to do on Thursday, but Robert, Chris and I took a ferry out to Fitzroy Island and Moore Reef for snorkelling, reef viewing and lunch. Fitzroy didn't

have much to offer the passing visitor. To see and enjoy it would require at least a day trip or accommodation on the island. Fitzroy is one of the more recent developments in the north. I visited it many years ago as a wilderness when I was on loan to the navy. We then had a bunch of Indonesians to entertain and took them plus Len over to Fitzroy on Patrol boats for a barbeque.

At Moore Reef the boat anchored at a moored platform some distance from the reef, for ecological reasons. Everyone was given flippers and snorkel to make their way out to see the coral, but like a couple of others I chickened out. It was too far for me without being able to stand up! But I did see the reef after lunch - a basic boxed lunch included in our fare. Chris and I had also bought tickets for the glass bottomed reef viewer. The day was cloudy, the colours were subdued, and all in all it was not a satisfactory excursion.



When we got back to Cairns we found that Barry and Judith had arrived, having left Canberra a couple of days after we did.

Accommodation in Cairns was scarce, and they ended up spending one night in a new backpackers hostel before moving to a northern beach motel. The hostel was so new that this was its first night open and the paint was not even dry. Friday was declared a day out for all. Chris and Robert went on the scenic train trip to Kuranda, and Len & I, Barry & Judith, drove the Nissan and Rover up there to meet them. Then it was on to Lakes Eacham and Barrine, The Crater, Yungaburra and the Curtain Fig Tree, and Malanda.

The lakes had changed since I remembered them from 1973, and I wouldn't bother ever going back. The fig tree is still worth a visit though, perhaps even more so than in the past because it now has a viewing platform set back about the right distance for photography, and a boardwalk all the way around the tree. The Crater is an impressive hole in the ground with vertical sides falling to a mini sunken lake.

Nothing much happened on Saturday except that we did the major part of our shopping for the next couple of weeks, and spent some time on Ellis Beach. On Sunday 2 August Robert, Chris and I in the Nissan,

Barry and Judith in the Rover and Chris's friend Geoff with his mother and grandmother in a Ford F100, two wheel drive, headed off for Bloomfield via Mossman and the Daintree ferry.

We got to within 17km of Bloomfield when we decided to turn back. The road was **very** steep, and eroded in parts, and not the kind of country the F100 could have successfully negotiated. Robert had already had to snatch it out of a minor creek crossing. Anyway we did see for ourselves the controversial section of the road, which was what we set out to do.

# Cairns - Cooktown – Cairns, 681km

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Our original itinerary had been through the Lakefield National Park, and covering the centre and the east coast on the way north, then doing the west coast on the way home. This had to be changed at short notice to fit in with Len's pastoral work. So Monday found us departing Cairns at 11.00am for Cooktown. Just the Range Rover and the Nissan. Len still had work to do in Cairns. We were to spend overnight in Cooktown, call in to see Louie Komsic at the Palmer River roadhouse on the way back to Cairns, then head west to Chillagoe on the main part of our itinerary.

## Monday was the day Murphy emerged from hiding

We had barely turned off the northern highway south of Mossman when the smell of burning insulation brought us to a rapid halt. The Nissan is a 24-volt system, and I had an electronic voltage regulator supplying 12 volts to the CB and the car fridge. This had worked for years with a Koolatron fridge drawing 4 amps, but now I had a Finch drawing more like 6 amps. The regulator decided to quit, put 24 volts across the CB and wiped it out and started burning the wires. This was despite the fact that the regulator was fuse protected on both its in and out wires.

Lack of a CB didn't immobilise me so we isolated the offending circuit and continued. The Finch still would work on 240 volts or gas, and we even thought we would put it on one of the 12-volt batteries, though Nissan did not recommend this because it upsets the charging rate and may result in the other battery seriously overcharging.

Barry was the next victim. North of Lakeland, doing about 100k to ride over the corrugations, he suffered a blowout in his right rear tyre and severely dented the rim. The road north of Lakefield was dreadful, and it might sound irresponsible to be doing 100k, but the easiest way to negotiate corrugations is to go fast enough to get on top of them - generally around 80k. Slower speeds are more punishing to the vehicle unless at a virtual walking pace.

Of course other road conditions can impose their own restrictions and reduce permissible speed, but 100k was quite acceptable on this stretch of road. Judith showed Barry how to use the Range Rover jack, as he admitted never having had to use it before!! We helped (watched?) him change wheels and disappear

into the distance. A kilometre or so down the road we picked up a nail in our left rear tyre and had to do our own wheel change.

It was after 5.00pm when we arrived in Cooktown, and we had showers at the public shower/toilet block on the waterfront, near the spot where Cook beached the Endeavour in 1770 to repair damage sustained on the reef; then I went to contact Sister Catherine at the convent to get a key for the church, where we had been offered accommodation.

It has a room that serves as a flat for visiting priests, since Cooktown has not had a resident priest since Len left there in 1984. There was one bed, a rather noisy wire frame one, and different stories apply to its allocation depending on who is telling the story. Anyway I ended up with the bed, Robert and Chris slept on the floor of the flat, and Judith and Barry slept in comfort in their portable double bed on the floor of the sacristy.

I don't think Chris normally talks in his sleep or suffers from nightmares, but it is said that he suffered from attacks of "green monsters" that night and he woke Robert and me up chasing them away.

Some people would have it that Sister Catherine wanted Judith to have the bed, but I am sure she would not have wanted to share the room with Chris's green monsters.

### **Murphy was up earlier than we were.**

We were up pretty early on Tuesday morning to be first in line to have our punctures repaired at the local repair shop. They were even able to beat Barry's rim back into shape.

I now found that the **new** shock absorbers I had fitted in Canberra, which had done about 4000k altogether and only around 500 of that off the bitumen, had disintegrated three of their rubbers and chewed out the rest. Two of them were inoperative. Faced with that I elected to replace all shocks, at whatever cost because, after all, we had not yet started the trip proper. I was unable to buy shocks in Cooktown, or even proper replacement rubbers. Holden rubbers were the nearest things available to get me back on the road and back to Cairns. Frantic phone calls to Len in Cairns started a search for replacement shock absorbers. Four independent suspension specialists told me I was stupid to fit the Big Country shocks that had been recommended to me in Canberra. They are not suitable to a Nissan Patrol on north Queensland roads.



We fitted Holden replacement rubbers and proceeded to do the tourist thing, including a drive to Grassy Hill that gives a view over the town and surrounding countryside but does not reveal the extensive area once occupied by Cooktown in its heyday as a goldfield. Then it was on for a visit to the museum organised courtesy of Ian McKinna, the curator, who used to be Len's neighbour for some years. The church is just behind the museum that specialises in items relating to Cook's voyage through the area. It has a cannon and anchor from the Endeavour on display.

Before leaving Cooktown I bought a new CB, as I thought it really essential to safety and sociability for the rest of the trip. After morning tea provided by Sister Catherine, who seemed to really enjoy the extra company we provided, we drove out of town to the Lion's Den Hotel, a popular tourist attraction in that part of the world and probably worth more time for anyone who can afford it. Barry, leading the convoy, claims to have seen a snake across the road so long that its head and tail could not be seen, and said we would not see it because of the **rattles** in the Nissan!? And this was **before** we had been to the hotel.

The Lion's Den is located on the Cooktown to Bloomfield road and would be a welcome port of call for anyone successfully negotiating the route up through Daintree. There is good camping and swimming there on the Annan River as well as cold beer. We settled for lunch and a beer, and then moved on to the roadhouse at Palmer River where Hann first discovered gold in 1872.

Louie Komsic has done wonders with this since he bought it as a rough going concern many years ago. It has a lot of character, with slate walls and floor, magnificent heavy solid wood tables, art works on the walls, and excellent hospitality. Louie has a small museum there, put together from articles he has used or collected over the years. He has lived a very interesting and rugged life in the area, and featured on the ABC's Big Country in August 1987. The Palmer River was the source of more than a million ounces of gold in the late 1870s when there were over 15,000 people on the fields.

The barramundi dinner Luba Komsic prepared for us was magnificent, and I found that Louie has a respectable wine cellar at very competitive prices. Louie was away at another property he owns, so unfortunately our party missed one of the planned attractions of the trip. He is really worth meeting. That night we camped under the stars in Louie's camping area. Barry and Judith slept indoors in the Range Rover.

Wednesday morning, a late start after morning tea with Luba, a phone call to Len from Mareeba, and finally back in Cairns at 3.00pm. Chris and I went straight to a suspension specialist, Pedder's, which had just opened up the road from Len's. Shock absorbers Len had ordered from Townsville were not allowed on the aircraft as they were gas filled, and all other attempts to get new shocks for the Nissan had failed. Here we fitted new Sports Ryder shock absorbers at \$300 the four. They looked and sounded as though they were just the thing we needed for what was ahead of us, and certainly had the full recommendation of the specialist who went over my Nissan like a motor registry inspector. We were to see later the further consequences of mismatching after-market accessories to vehicles. Chris also set up a socket for the Finch fridge, which we decided to try for a couple of days running off the right hand battery.

# Cairns - Drumduff Station, 444km

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## Thursday: nothing went wrong

Departure from Cairns was a bit slow, but by 11.00am all three vehicles were on the road. From now on Robert and Chris would alternate between the Nissan and Len's Land Cruiser to put two people in each car. Robert and I were to share the driving of the Nissan. Not that we didn't trust Chris, but we were both familiar with the Nissan and four wheel driving, and this familiarity should pay off over the next 3000 odd kilometres of outback bulldust, corrugations and whatever else was thrown up at us. The road from Cairns to Dimbulah is bitumen, and gravel from there on, so we were in Chillagoe in time for a quick lunch before joining a tour of the Royal Arch cave.

On the way we passed several dumps of marble from the quarries for which Chillagoe is famous. Chillagoe marble has been compared with the Carrara marble from Italy, and some people believe that it is Chillagoe marble in the Parliament House not Carrara marble.

Not many of the limestone caves are open to the public and they are not to be compared with Jenolan or Wombeyan, but they do have their interests if your expectations are not too high; and the tours are free under the guidance of an NPWS ranger. Our guidebook had said there was camping on the river at Chillagoe, and that's what we had planned to do. But the local council said there was no camping on the river. So we camped in the local caravan park. I didn't think to check if the park owner was on the council. The caravan park was not too bad, with a covered picnic area and long wooden tables, a fuel stove, and a massive mango tree under which we slept. At six o'clock on Friday morning the temperature was 6 Celsius, reminding us of Canberra. **And Murphy was awake.**

The CBs hadn't been working as well as expected. I had put a portable in Len's car, and installed the new one in mine. Communication between any combination of Range Rover, Nissan, and Land Cruiser was less than ideal and at times not much better than a naked shout. After breakfast I opted to take the Nissan out along the road to check radio range. It was every bit of 4km, which is not good. Doing a U turn to come home I picked up a boulder on the shoulder of the road. It rolled eccentrically under the vehicle and pushed the chassis cross-member up onto the drive-shaft-mounted brake drum. The

noise and the smell were dreadful. I had to take the cross member off to drive back to camp.

So while the others went on tour of a second cave, the Donna cave, Len and I proceeded to beat the cross member back into shape with a sledgehammer. We finally got away about 11.30, much later than planned. But it wasn't going to matter anyway, because Murphy had only just started. Exactly 200 kilometres from Chillagoe heading west, and 50 kilometres from Drumduff station, the Nissan refused to go any further.

Shades of the Ancient Mariner, I had 130 litres of fuel in the tank and couldn't get any of it to the engine. It wasn't any of the common things like fuel filters or even the EDIC (electronic diesel injection control) motor that controls fuel flow amongst other things in the Nissan. Having no alternative, and with the daylight almost gone, we made camp where we were. It was our first night out of civilisation, and we lit a fire and slept with the ants and the spear grass.

Fortunately the next day was a Saturday, with the four-wheel drive specialists who service Len's car in Cairns working. We were early in the queue on the radiotelephone to Robbie, telling him the symptoms of our breakdown and asking for advice. While he wasn't able to diagnose the problem, he did eliminate some of the theories we proposed and narrowed the field for further investigation. Finally, and I think it was at Barry's suggestion, we blew down the fuel line from the engine end and that gave us the answer. The fuel line was perforated right back at the outlet at the top of the fuel tank. Diesels do not go well with air in the lines. In fact they do not go at all.

The part of the line giving the problem was between the rear floor and the top of the fuel tank, rather difficult to get at. So we decided to siphon off fuel into a 5-litre container and feed it directly to the engine from the passenger's seat where Chris would nurse it. Actually that is very much the short



version of events, because we discussed calling the trip off and going home.

But the way home from here was a lot harder and further than help at Drumduff. Even so, the next 50km were difficult ones. We were only able to do the siphon job three times before the makeshift fuel line refused to function any longer, and this had taken us only 30km.

That was all that was needed though. Up to this point it would have been impossible to tow me because of the bulldust and the nature of the terrain, whereas now Len could tow me with relative safety. Sometimes the bulldust was so thick that it flowed over the cars like waves when they first hit it. This caused problems enough for the driver, without taking into account a towed vehicle in which the visibility would have been zero. So it was on the end of a towrope that I finally arrived at Drumduff station at 2.00pm.

Drumduff was an oasis in the wilderness. Situated on the northern bank of the Palmer River, it covers about 10,000 square kilometres and is owned by the Hughes family. Tony and Lisa Cockburn are the present managers, and Lisa made us very welcome - Tony being away mustering.

It took us till dark to familiarise ourselves with the station workshop and drain and drop the fuel tank. With this particular problem and all the others that were to plague me before the end of the trip, Chris proved to be worth his weight in Barramundi fillets. Then it was time to clean up and enjoy the hospitality of Drumduff, with a well-cooked meal served in the main kitchen. Helen Rivett, a French-Canadian from Montreal, had been station cook for a week and was doing very well. Very attractive she was too. She had made a potato cake, which, over the two days we were there, we ate with our coffee or with custard, and all came back for more each time; great way to use potatoes.

Bed was a camp on the front lawn in our sleeping bags/swags. For the entire trip the weather was pleasant, with cool nights that required a sleeping bag or something similar and days that suited shorts and short-sleeved shirts. Wild pigs roamed the country around the homestead, but we slept within a fenced compound with the station dogs for company. When the rest of us rejected a particularly friendly dog as a sleeping companion Chris ended up with it.

Sunday restored our spirits. It was a much shorter job getting the fuel tank remounted and refilled than getting it down to fix. But for Judith, who seemed to know what she was doing and what anybody needed next, it would have taken a lot longer. I think she has had lots of practice at "fixing" Barry's succession of four-wheel drives over the decades of their experience. Barry does a lot of fixing **before** things break down.

We had the Nissan fixed and tested before lunch, and were able to go fishing. I actually caught a perch, but it really wasn't big enough to keep. The rest of the afternoon was taken up resting in the cool breezeway of the homestead and watching cattle being loaded/unloaded from a cattle train at the stockyards. The skill with which the drivers of those cattle trains can reverse their prime movers to couple with the dogs of the train is uncanny. (The dog is the trailer with a steerable front wheel as opposed to a "pig" which has fixed wheels fore and aft.)

During the afternoon Len introduced Helen to the Aussie custom of billy tea, and the way of swinging it in a vertical circle without spilling it. She did it well, but kept her eyes closed the whole time. Hospitality continued unabated with a baked dinner that night, attended by Tony who had come in from the mustering camp.

# Drumduff Station – Edward River, 320km

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Tony had invited us to call at the camp at Police Lagoon, about an hour's drive from the homestead, when we departed Drumduff next day. He would be departing while it was still dark, to get an early start at the yards. At 9.00am on the Monday, 10th August, we pulled in to watch the branding and yarding of cattle that had been recently mustered. These were sorted into three categories and put into separate yards. They were either destined for the abattoir, back to the bush to grow a bit more, or into a holding paddock because they belonged to another station.

Much of the grazing is free range, and mustering will produce cattle from neighbouring stations. These are held separately from the station's own cattle until collected by the rightful owner. For morning teatime it was johnnycakes and billy tea with the ringers, both white and aboriginal. Then we thought Murphy struck again, but he was only teasing.

The Nissan wouldn't start after morning tea, and there were serious mumblings about going straight back to Cairns and just doing a tame trip up the centre of the Peninsula. A jump-start on one battery got me going, and I reasoned the problem had been leaving the fridge on while I was towed into Drumduff. That, plus many practice starts during the repair period, had virtually flattened the right hand battery. A good day's driving should solve that problem.

Our destination this day was Rutland Plains, south of Kowanyama, over near the west coast. To get there it is necessary to cross the Mitchell River, and the obvious place to do this is between Koolatah and Dunbar stations. At this point the riverbed appeared to be a few hundred metres wide with about a hundred metres of water. In fact it is around 900 metres wide in strong flow in the wet season.

The crossing was over coarse sand and the water at its deepest about 60 centimetres. Unfortunately the sand is quicksand. Until it is disturbed it is firm, but once disturbed it rapidly separates and offers no firm base. We mapped out our crossing routes and proceeded to enjoy lunch before attempting the crossing. I think Barry was having second or third thoughts here. The Rover had never been in deep water.



## Two out of three river crossings

Len has crossed here many times successfully and did so again, though he faltered in the middle and I thought he wouldn't make it. I kept wide of Len's tracks and upstream to avoid the quicksand effect, but Murphy was waiting for me. Halfway across, the Nissan decided that the only direction it would take henceforth would be straight down, and that's where I stopped. The engine was running and I had to keep it that way, with the exhaust well under water, and water more than ankle deep in the cab.

Chris and Robert stripped to the essentials, and with the Tirfor from off the roof rack plus a steel rope from Len's vehicle managed to winch me out over the next hour or so, using Len's Toyota as an anchor. There is no way the Nissan wanted to come out of the river under its own power. Every time I was winched out of a bog and applied power I sank straight down again.

Barry had a grandstand view of all this from the north bank, and his look of despair got worse when he saw Len's little falter followed by my disaster. He was all smiles when, with a different driving technique - smarter than some of us - he drove over fast enough to create a bow wave and not get caught in his own quicksand. By the time I was on dry ground I had used the clutch a few times in the water, but it was still working ok. However the rear brake drums made horrifying noises, so it was necessary to remove those to see the cause. Both drums were chock-a-block with coarse sand. This would have chewed out the new shoes and the drums in no time so I had to stop right there and wash and clean them. Robert and I managed this while the others waited, and Chris took pictures to record the incident for posterity. Even so we arrived at Rutland Plains at 4.30pm, in time for a pre - dinner drink with Peter and Julia Cannon.

## Murphy was starting to enjoy himself by now

Our casks of sherry and port were both leaking into the food bins that contained most of our consumables as well as the wine. Rather than waste it we made a concerted effort to consume what remained. Rutland Plains is one of the major cattle stations in the north, running one beast to 8 hectares and having a sea frontage on the Gulf of Carpentaria where picnics are held but no-one dare swim. The houses are well constructed and comfortable. The main homestead was once a hotel in Chillagoe, and the expedition to get it to Rutland Plains would have made our little safari look insignificant.

There is a resident mechanic with a workshop, and Peter has his own aircraft. Once again country hospitality was extended to us and we were offered real beds for the night and hot showers. We enjoyed the showers but, after cooking our dinner on our gas stoves, we elected to sleep on the lawn, as we had at Drumduff. Wild pigs were a real menace here too, but not to us while we slept.

Kowanyama, only about 25 kilometres from Rutland Plains, was established as an Anglican mission in the early 1900s, and has a population of less than 1000. 7.30am saw Robert and Chris in the Nissan, and Barry and Judith in the Range Rover, heading for Kowanyama. I stayed behind with Len for a morning Mass and some other duties he had, and we got away at 9.45, meeting the others there where we refuelled.

Refuelling required paying for a specified amount of fuel at the community administration office and getting a receipt, which was taken to the fuel depot. Any payment in excess of fuel actually taken could be redeemed back at the office. I had estimated and paid for 70 litres, but could only squeeze in 68. It wasn't worth the effort to go back to the office for \$1.20, so I left the fuel depot with a slightly bigger profit margin. Certainly no one could complain at 60 cents/litre out there.

There are no roads or tracks shown on any of my maps joining Kowanyama with Edward River. They do exist, though, and Len successfully navigated us. By 3.20pm we were in Edward River after a half hour lunch break. As with Kowanyama, the Anglican Church had established Edward River as a mission in 1936. It is best known now for its crocodile farm.

Local authorities do not permit camping within a 10-kilometre distance of Edward River but Ron Wildin, equivalent of a shire clerk (and I forget his title), made his newly acquired 3 bedroom home available to us. It was too late to see the crocodile farm, but we did go out to the coast to see the mudflats reaching into the Gulf of Carpentaria. The beach wasn't sand but shells, and while most were common and broken there were a few large and interesting ones. Both Robert and Chris brought home representative samples. I brought home a few small ones that don't count for much except to say that I've been there.

In Ron's lounge room that night Barry's ambitions exceeded his capabilities when he tried to stop the ceiling fan with his hands. He got sore fingers for his trouble, and the fan didn't stop. Kowanyama and Edward River were, within a day or so of our visits, being turned over to the local communities according

to a Deed of Grant in Trust, or DOGIT for short. In addition Edward River was to change its name to Poompuraaw.

The crocodile farm is not run as a tourist attraction but as a commercial enterprise for skins and meat. We were able to visit it on Wednesday morning and had a good look around with a guide supplied. We were warned not to lean over the wire fences restraining the crocs, as they move fast and furiously when they want to. The fences are only about 70cm high. Some spontaneously tried to get at us as we passed by throwing themselves at the wire fencing, highlighting the warning.

Depending on their size the crocs were fully enclosed for protection from hawks and other predators, or just fenced in pens with walkways between them. The very large ones, around 3 to 5 metres, are kept in a separate enclosure on the coast. This is probably a few hectares, and has a high wire fence with a viewing platform. Driving around it we were able to see a couple of giants and many smaller ones.

# Edward River – Bamboo Station, 270km

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At 11.15 we said goodbye to Ron Wildin and Edward River. Ron had cooked us a magnificent big breakfast of bacon and eggs that morning because we had fed him the night before. I know who came off best on that deal. It's a small world too. Joe Gangemi, doctor from Murgon and coincidentally brother-in-law of mine, was in the area barramundi fishing. He came into Edward River for provisions on Wednesday morning and met up with us quite unexpectedly at Ron Wildin's place.

The road to Strathgordon was not in good shape, we had been told. It was described in the guidebook as extremely hazardous. However there is a private road, built by the Prices who own Strathgordon, to which Len had access. This proved to be of quite reasonable quality, not being pounded by semis and road trains, and we made good time. Strathgordon had featured on the ABC's Big Country some years back with Ruby Price and family. Now there were two of the next generation families resident. Jackie is an artist of some note, with some excellent paintings of horses, local area, and a Cairns scene either finished or in progress. Her husband, Peter, was away mustering.

This is the mustering time of year, as must by now be obvious. Jackie was in a house I had not seen when I was in Strathgordon in 1984. John and Wendy now occupied the house I remembered from those days. We stayed only long enough to pay our respects and for Len to catch up on local gossip before proceeding to Musgrave on our way to Bamboo Station.

Vegetation on this part of the trip was predominantly eucalypt and grassland. The "road" at times consisted of numerous sets of wheel tracks pointing in roughly the same direction, but separated by several hundred metres. As the tracks deteriorated in the wet season, new ones were forged, so that after a few years there were countless options available to the motorist. Fortunately they all ended up at the same place, but at times we were out of sight or sound of Len for considerable distances.

Bulldust was always a problem, and I had to be aware of the need to clean the air filters more frequently than I was accustomed to. Actually, the Nissan pre-filter and air filter worked superbly and I had no trouble in that area at all. The ubiquitous termite mounds were prolific here, but were only a metre or so

high. We also passed a few lagoons with bird life, including some fine specimens of jabiru.

Before leaving Cairns we had planned a lamb barbeque at Bamboo as a diversion for them from the ever-present beef. I bought two bulk packs from Woolworths, and Len arranged for them to be sent to Musgrave through Peters Ice Cream, courtesy of the local carrier who does the run to Musgrave.

Musgrave, by the way, is the hub of the local community with fuel, provisions, accommodation for organised tour groups, cafe, STD phone, airstrip and a wealth of local information. It was dark and late by the time we got to Musgrave and the place was a hive of activity, with a long wait for meals. Barry decided to put us all to shame by showering and dressing well. He even wanted to put a tie on. Though it was only a short drive from here to Bamboo, we didn't want to arrive on their doorstep at mealtime. So we ordered massive hamburgers and asked about our lamb. It was in the freezer, but no one knew who had brought it up from Cairns!

### Bamboo Station

The sign on the gate said "NEVER MIND THE DOG, BEWARE OF THE OWNER." and the doormat had woven into it "Oh No, Not You Again", but the reception was quite different from the implications. Snow and Valda Evans welcomed us at Bamboo, and we were set for a couple more days of superb hospitality. The first night was a late one, and it must have been nearly midnight when Snow shut off the generator that supplies power to the homestead. Barry and Judith slept in the double bed Range Rover, Len in his permanently allocated room at Bamboo homestead, and the rest of us in the ringers' quarters commonly referred to as "the flat".

Bamboo is not a pretentious homestead by any means, being built at ground level of corrugated iron and tree trunks. I like it. It's an attractive home set in its own fenced garden area, and kept spotlessly clean by Valda. And it has a real air of friendliness about it. The flat is an annexe to the shed that forms the workshop and saddlery and so forth for the horses.

Two residents I had not met on previous visits to Bamboo were Ricky, Snow's son and competent ringer, and Mickey Bibbo the Galah. Mickey is a young bird rapidly acquiring an old mind and a ringer' vocabulary. Valda really shouldn't be teaching him those things. I found Mickey quite friendly, but he has a reputation for biting people in tender places without warning. Mickey apparently doesn't know he is a galah, but thinks he is a dog or a person - the

creatures he spends most time with. On one occasion when he was outdoors and was visited by a local free galah he came screaming back into the house not wanting anything to do with this strange visitor.

Bamboo has on it a hot spring known as Hot Water where the water starts off at nearly boiling point and forms a hot creek flowing out from the swampy area where the spring is located. We had planned to visit this on Thursday morning. I had been there with Len in 1984 and stayed overnight. Though it was only 35 kilometres from the homestead, it had taken us two hours to drive each way then. We thought we would do the trip in the morning and be back for a late lunch this time. But Snow had not been to Hot Water in twelve months and couldn't guarantee the condition of the track.

To cut a long story short, at 1.00pm, after four and one half hours on the track, we had progressed a mere 21 kilometres, had to rebuild a section of the track, and been bogged in the sand at Twelve Mile Creek, which was as far as we got. Obviously it wasn't to be a simple two-hours-each-way trip this time, so we called it quits. We had only the two vehicles on this trip, the Nissan and the Land Cruiser. Barry's car was set up for sleeping and there was neither sense nor need to disturb the arrangement for what should have been a short excursion.

Robert had driven the Nissan on its way out, and it was my turn to drive it back. At one point, negotiating a rutted climb down into a creek bed, I slipped into a deep rut I should have been straddling and reshaped two sections of the right sill. Barry was our passenger and at some stage, ruminating on this and my previous misfortune in the Mitchell River, he suggested I look at the oil in my diffs and gearboxes.

We had a long wait for Len on the way home. Snow had some cattle yarded and was watching them, so we stopped to talk for what seemed like ages while waiting for Len to catch up. Finally, just as I decided to retrace our steps to see what was wrong, he arrived with a disarming story of checking out the countryside. In fact the Toyota had fallen into a rut while Len was momentarily distracted in passing on his comprehensive knowledge of local flora and fauna, and sat on its rear diff until Chris dug it out. He didn't want us to know that, but we have ways and means of finding out.

Having nothing better to do for the afternoon I inspected the oil levels once we were safely back at the homestead. The front diff and gearbox were ok, but the rear diff and transfer box were full of a water and oil emulsion. Len had a two-way acting pump that would make it easy to pump oil into the casings

after dropping the rubbish out, and between us we had enough oil to do the job twice. Murphy let me get about two pumps worth before the pump broke irreparably.

Fortunately Snow had a big pump on a 200-litre drum that I was able to use. We didn't have to give in to Murphy too easily. Thursday night was a night for champagne and the lamb barbeque. Fortunately the champers had travelled without incident. But it was rather warm to start with, as my Finch had not been able to cool it down even on full power all day. We drank it and enjoyed it, and came back for more, as it got colder in Valda's freezer. It was another late night.

Station life makes no concessions to late night socialising, and it was still dark - must have been around 5.30 - when Snow got up next morning. I know when he got up because the generator he started was at the foot of my bed. Country and western music is popular at that time of the day too, and we got a fair sample of it from the house as Snow had his breakfast and got organised. That meant we were available for a relatively early start too, but not all of us were going on.

Barry had decided that the going was a bit too rough for the Range Rover and, since we had been warned that rain would almost certainly prevent our going to the east coast, he had seen all he wanted to see of the Peninsula. At that stage he didn't know just how much worse things were going to get before we completed the tour. He does now.

Leaving Bamboo I had gained the impression that the two negative notices confronting the visitor were strictly aimed at the mineralogists who were despoiling sections of the property against the wish of the owners. It seems that the owner has no property rights against anyone wanting to take out a mining lease, and there are few restrictions on how the lessee treats the land. I suppose the only answer is to claim aboriginal blood and land rights.

Chris had made such a good impression on Valda that she gave him a large colour photo of the homestead taken from the air.



# Bamboo Station – Weipa, 350 km

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## Murphy rests for a while

We were going through Coen to Weipa, an easy days drive, and in Coen we called on Irene Williams who runs the general store there. Coen, once famous for its goldfields, is a busy little community in the dry season, and offers a wide range of amenities. It is well known for its race meeting, held in August, but which we missed. Irene and her husband Merv have been friends of Len for years and I had met them and enjoyed their hospitality on previous trips. Irene's mother, Mrs Taylor, who runs the guesthouse, served us a substantial morning tea under a bougainvillea that's almost a century old and has a trunk like an old oak. It makes magnificent shade in the heat of the day.

Murphy seemed to be resting for a while, but we weren't far out of Coen on the way north when the Land Cruiser exhaust pipe broke off completely at the manifold flange. That's not the sort of thing to expect from a car about two years old, even up there. Rather than return to Coen for repairs we elected to continue with the extra heat and noise to Weipa. At least we were still moving forward, and there would be a reasonable chance of getting it fixed in Weipa.

So at 4.00pm we arrived at the presbytery where Father Hilary Flynn made space available. It's only a single bedroom house, so Chris and Len slept on the lounge room floor for a couple of nights and Robert and I slept in the back yard, which was quite pleasant. Friday night's dinner was barramundi at the Golf Club, and it was real barramundi too. Saturday was repair day for Len, with a skilled welder doing a job on the exhaust and the rest of us looking around.

Unfortunately there are no conducted tours of the town and the mine sites on weekends, but Robert and Chris decided it wasn't worth waiting until Monday to do a tour and so we would spend only the weekend in town. That was a bit of a disappointment, because it really is worthwhile to see how the open cut mining is organised in Weipa. First, the overburden of topsoil is removed and stored. This can be as deep as ten metres, but averages out at three. Then the bauxite is scraped off with massive machinery. Finally the original topsoil is replaced, with the final result being indistinguishable after a few years from nature's arrangement.

Established in 1898 as a Presbyterian mission, and now thriving on aluminium and owned by Comalco, Weipa is a delightful little town to my way of thinking, but not very active for casual visitors on a Saturday afternoon. So Robert and Chris practised climbing coconut trees in the presbytery grounds. Along with the Islander community at South Weipa it has a population of around 3000, and some of the people who have been there as long as 18 years really love the place. It has the usual library, swimming pool, cinema, an adequate shopping centre, plenty of greenery and gardens, artificial lakes, and numerous social groups who organise community events.

Chris borrowed a local pushbike to see as much of it as he could, and we also drove around the artificial lakes and the wharves where the massive ore carriers were loading from the man-made hills of red bauxite pebbles, and the white kaolin clay that is used in the manufacture of high quality glossy paper amongst other things.

Our event was to be an outdoor Mass followed by a bring-your-own communal dinner. About 100+ people came for Mass in the grounds of the church and pooled the plates for a feast afterwards under the stars and artificial lighting.

A couple of quietly spoken twins who drove the haul packs were present for the Mass and dinner. The haul pack trucks are the 100 tonne vehicles that carry 150 tonnes of bauxite from the open cuts to the processing plants. They are obviously pretty big pieces of machinery. The twins were women from Victoria, Bendigo I think, who came to Weipa on a working holiday and walked right into a job driving haul packs. Equal opportunity.

The party ended with one of the twins giving Chris a foot massage on one of the picnic tables in front of the presbytery. Other massages I have heard of, but a foot massage? At one stage she was massaging around his ankle, saying that this area was where his sex drive was controlled. I think Len's comment as he passed was that there had to be something wrong with Chris, to be driven by his ankles.

# Weipa – Moreton Telegraph Station, 132km

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After lunch on Sunday, 16 August, we said goodbye to Father Flynn, Sister Paul who helps with social work, and a very, very devoted parishioner Michael O'Rielly. Michael had been in and out of the presbytery on the Friday and Saturday doing various jobs and telling us about Weipa. Actually I was lucky to be mobile at the time. Len had found that one of the dining room chairs was damaged, and commented that no one should sit on it. But no one told me. About five minutes after this I sat through it rather than on it, to everyone's amusement but mine.

It was just over a three hour drive to Moreton Telegraph station on the northern bank of the Wenlock River to see John and Helen Meehan and 11 years old Becky (Rebecca). Moreton is the start of the real track to Cape York, as the road is graded up to this point. The Wenlock is the first river that requires fording and was



an easy river to cross, with a firm bed, smooth banks and not too much water flowing. Although I had not seen John or Helen since 1984, it was like meeting old lifetime friends again. And Becky was a real livewire who got on well with Robert and Chris and took no nonsense from anyone.

John was the senior Telecom technician for this part of the world, and fortunately had a comprehensive workshop, which we were soon to need. But at this stage all was still well, and we had a barbeque with the Meehans, another couple also resident at Moreton, and Tim and Glenn from respectively the Weipa police and the stock squad.

Tim was there to serve an eviction notice next morning on a couple who were squatting on the northern bank of the river selling touristy stuff like t-shirts, maps, coasters and so on. The council had tried to move them a few times without any luck, and had decided to bring in the law. Tim was a riot around the campfire with some of the stories he had to tell.

There was a clash of temperament later in the night when we visitors all wandered the 500 metres or so from Moreton to the Wenlock crossing, and Len earned the ire of the gentleman about to be evicted. He seemed to think we had no right to be wandering that area at night without his permission.

John and Helen's hospitality was unsurpassed and, as was becoming the custom, beds were made available. Len slept upstairs, but the other three of us slept downstairs, Robert and I in our swags. Chris slept in his swag, but availed himself of a bed. Moreton, as a telegraph station, ceases to function on 12 December 1987, now that all microwave towers are in place and working.

# Moreton Telegraph Station – Bamaga, 233km

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## Monday was really Murphy's day

Just after 10.00am and about 5 kilometres up the track I found the same fuel problem as before. The fuel line was perforated at its outlet in the tank and the fuel tank was plainly trying to beat itself to death on the rear floor of the car. Also, this time there was water in the fuel. I wasn't going anywhere, but neither was I in an ideal position for Len to tow me back, especially as I was in a badly rutted, deep sandy single track and facing the wrong direction. Just getting me turned around was an ordeal, and then it was the ignominious tow back to Moreton.

John came to our assistance, and it didn't take long this time to empty and drop the tank. Chris knew all the shortcuts now. The fault seemed to be a seat-anchoring bolt that was rupturing the fuel line. The 160-litre tank was an after-market replacement for the Nissan's 80-litre tank and now appeared to have a design fault. To circumvent any further similar problem we beat a dome into the floor above the fuel union with a ball peen hammer, giving the fuel line breathing space. Then we reassembled the tank, fixing the fuel return line that had come apart allowing the water into the fuel when we crossed the Wenlock.

But Murphy was not nearly finished yet.

Robert noticed that the front right shock absorber - newly fitted in Cairns, remember - had broken its bracket off and was flapping in the breeze. On advice from the locals I took both front shocks off and we set out for Cape York, albeit a bit later than originally planned. I had not even driven off the property before I decided it was positively unsafe to proceed like this, so back we went. I reckoned this was the end. I'd had enough signs to convince me that I was not meant to be in North Queensland in August 1987.

I wanted Len to take Robert and Chris to the top while I waited at Moreton for them to return. Len wouldn't do that, and I succumbed to urging from the Moreton folk to proceed the next day if John welded the bracket back on. When I put the front shocks back on I noticed the left one was very stiff. Still it was better than none at all, and at 7.15am on Tuesday we left Moreton for the third time on this trip heading north. I was to find in Canberra that this

shock absorber was damaged beyond repair, and was therefore probably barely functional even at this time. Even this third departure was not entirely without incident.

John Meehan had left earlier than we did for a point about 15 kilometres north of Moreton, a point he had reached in his contract to remove the old telegraph wires from the original poles. The line is no longer operational, having been superseded by satellite and microwave, and all the wire was being recovered. This was an historic event, the dismantling of the line 100 years old, and we had been invited to participate in cutting a section of the line. So at the 15km mark we duly found John and stopped to make some history of our own and to get some photographs.



Unfortunately the Nissan refused to switch off, even though the ignition switch was removed. This is symptomatic of a faulty EDIC motor, and again I vowed to call the game quits and go home. But not before getting some photos. So I just left the engine running. After we cut the wires Robert and Chris were able to collect some insulators from the tops of the poles. Besides having historic interest, they make distinctive candlestick holders when turned upside down.

When we came back and lifted the bonnet the cause was obvious. I had an isolator terminal on the left battery. This must be mounted sideways to avoid fouling when the bonnet closes. Whoever had reconnected it after our troubles at Moreton had mounted it fore and aft. When the bonnet was closed it broke the isolator. When I turned the engine off there was no power to the EDIC motor, so it could not cut off the fuel. Solution - restore power to the EDIC motor by removing the broken isolator and connecting the battery lead directly to the battery post. End of problem and no need to go straight home, so back on the way north.

Two of the creeks north of here were definitely "out". One required sliding into the creek from the south and winching out up the north bank. The other was apparently negotiable, but not much better. We had no desire to inflict this sort of treatment on ourselves. It was slowing up the tourist traffic considerably and raising tempers, and we could bypass the mess by going through Bramwell station via a private road. Len knows the Heinemann family who own Bramwell, and we were allowed transit through the property, for which we were thankful.

On Bramwell we saw some of the tallest and most magnificent specimens of termite mound, popularly but incorrectly referred to as ant beds, which we were to find on the entire trek. And we also saw the only dingo on the trip. It loped along in convoy between the two vehicles for a kilometre or so before going back to the bush.

Captain Billy's Landing, on the east coast, was on our itinerary by now but we decided, in view of my history of difficulties, to bypass this on the way north and include it on the way south if all was still going well. The most recent local news on the east coast weather was favourable, and we were prepared to at least try to get there. The only problem we encountered on this leg of the trip was that the ignition key could not be extracted, nor even turned to the off position at one point early in the journey.

I decided to pamper Murphy and leave the engine running all day, trying again to extract the key at the end of the day. It worked, and when we pulled into Fruit Bat Falls at 2.00pm to make an early camp and have a swim I was able to turn off the engine and remove the key as expected. The problem was that the original key was so well worn it somehow got locked in the tumbler. From then on I used a spare key.

Fruit Bat Falls was great, but the problem with all these places now is that they are becoming too popular. I don't think I want to go north ever again. There are just too many people. There was a sizeable team, from the Operation Raleigh group, constructing a formal car park at the falls. This sort of thing will be necessary with increasing tourist traffic to the top, and facilities should be made available to let more people see more of Australia, but I am glad to have done the trip before it becomes just another school holiday excursion. Perhaps the more formal atmosphere will contribute to a cleaner environment.

Just as pets have to be house trained, most tourists also in this part of the world need to be environment trained. From Fruit Bat Falls there are now two routes to the top, the original track with all its creek crossings and interesting



changes of scenery, and the Telecom track that avoids all creek crossings but is less interesting or challenging.

By 8.00am on Wednesday we were on our way via the old track, as we wanted to see Keith Barnes at his ferry crossing on the Jardine River. The Telecom track uses a ferry run by the local Northern Peninsula Association community. Since our track took us past our 1984 campsite at Eliot Creek we decided to call in. Local lore has applied the name "toilet roll creek" to this beautiful spot, and we now saw why. Unfortunately that's the price of "progress", and while mankind walks upright we will never change some of them. After a short swim we moved on, and reached the Jardine at 10.30. This part of the journey, with scenic creek crossings and more luxuriant vegetation than what we had passed through so far, was what pleasant memories of the top are made of.

The Jardine at the crossing is about 100 metres wide and 0.8 metres deep with a sandy bottom. It is perennial, with a good flow at this time of the year, and must be about the best drinking water in Australia. The Jardine's flow is nearly one million acre-feet a year, which, by way of comparison, is about 7 times the annual flow of the Brisbane River. There is a ford just upstream of the ferry crossing that is used by the more intrepid or less intelligent 4WD brethren, but I fail to see the merit in subjecting myself or my vehicle to the rigours of a wet crossing to save \$10 on a ferry. That sort of thing is OK for the Army on exercise, or if there is no alternative.

It is 30km from the Jardine to Bamaga, but the road is mostly dreadful and it was midday when we pulled into the car park for provisions after stopping to see the wreck of a DC3 that crashed short of the runway during World War II. It is fenced off as a memorial and deteriorates a bit more each year. Soon there will only be the plaque giving its story.

In the Bamaga community store we met Father Tom Mullins from Thursday Island. Father Mullins is responsible for Bamaga, and Len had made arrangements by phone for us to have access to the flat at the back of the church here should we need it. We had planned on seeing him on Thursday Island, but had not expected him to be at Bamaga on our arrival.

Over lunch in the church flat Father Mullins used his local knowledge to organise our ferry trip to T.I. Both ferries were booked for the Thursday, so we booked a return trip for the Friday. That meant we could sleep out on Wednesday night, move into the flat for Thursday night for an early ferry departure from Red Island Point on the Friday, and return to an established camp on Friday night for our departure south on Saturday morning.

# Cape York

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## A day of truth

We drove out to Punsand Bay after lunch to make camp on the beachfront, from where we could easily start our local sightseeing on Thursday. We found an acceptable spot and set up our bedrolls and cooking gear. Someone before us had left a fire smouldering, but we built our own for cooking on.

Punsand Bay is the enormous expanse of beach that stretches roughly east west to the west of Cape York. There is now a firm that has a camping concession there and has set up a caravan park, but we kept out of what we considered to be their area. After dinner, towards dark, I went for a walk with my shovel. About 100 metres from where we had our beds laid out I found a rubbish tip, probably for the caravan park, and a family of wild pigs scavenging it. That put our camp in an entirely different light.

I have not heard of people here being savaged by wild pigs in their sleep but, in view of the fact that we knew wild pigs to be savage and we did not know how many there were in the area or what directions they might take, we had to change our sleeping arrangements. It was too late to move camp in the dark. So we cleaned up all traces of food, packed all food containers in the cars or on the roof rack, and moved the beds. I slept in the driver's seat of the Nissan, Len in the front seat of the Toyota, and Chris in the cage on the tray of the Toyota.

Robert didn't share our concern, and wasn't worried by the presence of the pigs. As a keen bushwalker he has slept in pig country on many occasions. He elected to stay on the ground. Of course we didn't see or hear a pig all night, but we thought we did have to take the precautions. Len appeared to have the answer to our undisturbed night when he said next morning "No wonder we weren't bothered by the pigs. They couldn't stand the smell of us."

Thursday, 20 August, was the day of truth. At 9.40am we arrived at the tip of Cape York, 6511 kilometres on the track from Canberra. Air Queensland owns the northern tip of Australia, an arrangement for which the Queensland government should be ashamed. Such a nationally significant part of Australia should surely belong to the Australian people, not to private enterprise. Air Queensland runs a lodge catering for the more affluent tourists at Cape York, but provides a campground for the majority.

From the camping area there is a track through the forest and over the steep rocky hill to mainland Australia's most northerly point. It isn't a lot more inconvenient or uncomfortable to stay close to the water and follow the rocky shoreline around rather than go over the hill. We went over the hill, did the tourist bit and took our photos at the plaque on Australia's northern tip, then came back via the coast to celebrate with a cold beer before moving on to Somerset, the other historic site on Cape York.



In the 1860s and early 1870s Frank Jardine ran the settlement which was established in 1864 to provide a coaling station, trade, and refuge in north Queensland, and was Magistrate of the Territory and Chief Police Inspector. An outstation of the property was Lockerbie where the cattle were kept, having been overlanded from Rockhampton in a ten-month epic journey against severe odds in the form of aboriginal harassment and a full wet season on the track.

A homestead of sorts still exists there, and appeared to be undergoing renovation. The site for Somerset was well chosen, on a hill overlooking a smooth sandy beach with a picturesque outlook to Albany Island, which now supports a cultured pearl farm. Peter Pinney and Estelle Runcie tell Frank Jardine's story a reputedly ruthless character in his dealings with the aborigines, in the book "Too Many Spears". [Pinney, Peter; Runcie, Estelle. *Too Many Spears: The Dramatic Story of Australia's Turbulent Northern Frontier*. Angus & Robertson, 1978. ISBN: 9780207135873.]

The settlement with a once magnificent homestead is now little more than a small cemetery where Jardine and his Samoan princess wife are buried, the remains of a coconut plantation, and some not very impressive ruins. We stayed for lunch and a siesta, and then repaired through some thick, dark rainforest to the church flat at Bamaga to catch up on a lot of overdue washing. Laundry never proved a problem on the trip. Even on the single

overnight stops we were able to get clothes dry, but it did mount up and we had to do large washes occasionally.

# Thursday Island and Hammond Island

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Friday was for Thursday Island, and really was one of the best days of the whole trip. The \$35 return fare was quite reasonable, and gave us a choice of boats to come back on. We went over on an 18-passenger fast catamaran at 7.00am, arriving at 8.15, and were offered the option of returning at 2.00pm on the same craft, or staying till 3.00pm and returning on a large ferry holding about 80 people that called at Cape York to drop off the Lodge passengers before going to Bamaga to berth. I was told it wasn't really safe to leave the Nissan at the ferry terminal in Bamaga after dark. So, with Chris, Len and me staying, Robert opted to go home on the cat and take the car back to the church, returning at 7.00pm to pick us up off the big ferry. And thereby hangs a tale, as we didn't get back in till 8.15. But that comes later.

Father Mullins met us at the T.I. terminal and gave us a Land Cruiser utility for our use on the island. Thursday Island is not large, but to see it representatively requires a car, which we appreciated. But before we could start our sightseeing we had to enjoy the mandatory cup of tea or coffee at the presbytery. The Army was conducting an exercise in Torres Strait, and Father Mullins's presbytery was an officers' dormitory as well. So we met a few more people along the way.

The island is the administrative centre of Torres Strait and has a population that includes a number of state and federal public servants, which must be changing its face rapidly. I don't think I knew quite what to expect from what Len had told me of the place. He had been based there many years ago. Anyway I didn't expect the bustling, well-established community that I found. T.I. gave us access to Hammond Island, still very much an islander community and not yet on the tourist route.

There is a strong Catholic contingent in the 160 to 180 people who live there, and Siriaco Dorante brought a fast pontoon over to pick us up so that Len could visit the people he used to minister to when he was based on T.I. It was very much like a homecoming for him, and he was welcomed everywhere he went. Admittedly he would rather we forget that Mrs Garnier, a real old-timer, said she recognised him from a distance because of his "short funny legs", but both Chris and I recorded that bit for history.

The prominent feature on Hammond Island is the stone church on a hill. Built in about 1952, it is an imposing building constructed obviously with a lot of effort and care from rough-hewn chunks of grey granite. Its circular stained glass windows, probably 60cms or more in diameter, were unique in that they were formed from large beer bottles stacked horizontally with their bottoms lined up flat with the outside of the wall.



The tapered walls are so thick that, even at the top where the windows are, the bottles do not project into the church. The church is currently undergoing renovation with the interior being lined with concrete. Unfortunately not all the beer bottles have survived the ravages of time and renovation, and some of the windows are being sealed up. I don't think the Council chairman, Joe David, was being entirely facetious when he said he was thinking of asking the bishop to put on a beer party so that he could replenish his stock of large beer bottles!

### **Murphy got at me again on Hammond Island**

I am ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE that, a few days previously, I had checked my camera to see that the film was properly loaded, having been caught before. However, when I reached the 35th exposure and decided to reload before waiting for that last shot, all I rewound was the leader. Not even the CIA can separate 35 photos that have all been taken on the same frame. So everything I had photographed since Drumduff, and of course there would have been some undoubted masterpieces, was in vain and unrecoverable. I wasn't in a great frame of mind when we boarded the pontoon for the ride back to T.I. And by now we were getting pretty hungry. A counter lunch, a drive around the island a couple of times, drop Robert off to get the cat home, a bit of window shopping and send a few postcards, and by then it was getting almost too late for the last boat out. Chris ran off to the wharf, to ask the captain to hold the boat for us if necessary while Len and I raced back to the

presbytery to hand in the Toyota. Luckily we met a couple of army troops leaving the presbytery to go fishing. So in exchange for driving us down to the wharf we lent them the car for the rest of the day. I haven't heard any repercussions. The ferry didn't leave right on time and Chris didn't have to appeal to the captain.

The route home was entirely different from the route out, and it was also into the swell and the prevailing south-easterlies. Suffice to say that it was rough in places. But in other places, as we cruised close to the shores of the many islands, it was a pleasant voyage. Coffee was freely available, and beer at tourist prices. Passing Possession Island, where Captain Cook raised the British flag and with "3 volleys of small arms" took possession of Australia on August 22 1770, we were to see another instance of man's lesser desirable traits.

To mark the historic point of Cook's landing the Government had erected a brass plaque on a stand, visible from passing boats such as ours. Unfortunately, where the plaque should have been, there was only a vacant space. Probably it's hanging on some yachty's wall in Amsterdam or Adelaide or somewhere.

At Cape York at about 6.00 o'clock everybody except Len, Chris and me got off the boat. We three were having nagging doubts about ever getting home. Would the boat stay here, go back to T.I. or what? To resolve doubts I asked one of the two crewmembers if we would be back in Bamaga by 7.00pm (which was the time we were given in T.I.). "Seven o'clock, you've got to be joking! Is that what they told you? Nearer to eight. They forget we have to offload here, and head into the current on the way home."

Currents and tides here must really be a problem for captains and pilots of boats. Tides do not occur regularly, and frequently there is only one tide in 24 hours. It was actually 8.15 when we berthed, but until then we had the boat entirely to ourselves. The price of beer came down and we were given the freedom of the boat, ending up doing the last hour or so in the wheelhouse watching the lighthouses and radar in the dark. The run from Cape York, through the myriad of islands at sunset, without a care in the world was positively the most relaxed time on the entire trip.

### **And Murphy wasn't on board.**

The terminal was in darkness when we got there and there wasn't much light from the council lighting. Naturally Robert wasn't still there at that time of night, and we needed a telephone. Through an open doorway of a nearby

shack we could see two women and a girl sitting at a sewing machine. So we quietly walked over and asked directions to the nearest phone. Well you'd have thought the Evil Spirits had come. The girl scurried off to the rear of the room in a panic, and the two women looked as though they were going to have heart attacks. Then they all burst out laughing, and we could relax and join them. Apparently, with the lighting the way it was and whatever we were wearing, all they saw at first were three disembodied heads. They reckoned their time had come.

We parted friends, and the telephone was only a few metres behind us. It didn't have a light either. I think we had a late feed of sausages for dinner that night, followed by two litres of ice cream to satisfy Len's craving. We found that ice cream doesn't keep in the tropics once it is opened, so we really did have to finish it all.



# Bamaga – Moreton, 241km

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## A day to go down in Murphy history

On Saturday, 22 August we left the church at Bamaga at 7.30am. Before we left I had to go back inside and get some Dettol to pour over my sneakers. They were so ripe that no amount of washing could remove the smell entirely. The only other pair of shoes I had were my Hush Puppy Body Shoes, a bit good for wearing on the track. So I figured I was stuck with smelly sneakers until I got back to civilisation. Just change the socks as often as possible, and watch for approaching tinea - or white wriggly things, whichever came first.

The kilometres to Keith Barnes's ferry hadn't improved since we had traversed them a few days previously, but then they were no worse. When we arrived at the northern bank of the river we drove upstream to the ford, having heard that there was a Toyota having an extended deep bath there. It had already been pulled out, but Keith said it had been expensively bogged in the river a little earlier.

While Len was crossing on the single vehicle punt I checked my load. For thousands of kilometres now, the catch on the tyre carrier had been playing up by coming undone at any time. The first few times I got caught and the tyre swung like a gate in a breeze. Then I had held the carrier locked to the rear bumper with an elastic strap. The catch still came open but the tyre didn't go anywhere. Every time I stopped we did the catch up again: another design fault in after-market accessories.

Finally I found that I could use the strap to keep the catch closed, and it had been this way for probably a couple of thousand km. But today was different. The tyre carrier itself was disintegrating, with tears in the metal in two places and one long weld totally broken off. Like my shock absorber earlier, the tyre was flapping in the breeze. I had nowhere else to put it, and Len came to the rescue by roping it inside his cage after a reshuffle of his own equipment. Murphy's score: one.

About 12 kilometres down the track from the ferry there is a turn-off to the Telecom track, or Wimps' Way, as it is known because it avoids all creek crossings. We wimped. I didn't want creek crossings any more on the way south than I did going north. Only 50km along this track I heard a sound I didn't like and we stopped to look at shock absorbers. Sure enough, the front

right had broken through its bracket. Great weld. It held and the bracket gave. That put paid to any thought of going to Captain Billy's Landing on the way south. Murphy's score: two.

But at least we were on our way home. Once again we went via Bramwell to Moreton. This road through Bramwell is a private road on private property, but some tourists don't want to respect this. A Victorian driver had called at Moreton after being turned back at Bramwell, wanting to phone everyone from the local member to the Weipa police in order to force Theresa Heinemann to unlock her gate for him. He got no sympathy at Moreton and finally went back to the South Alice Creek to help rebuild its crossing.

We were lucky because of Len's connection with the Heinemann family. It was somewhere along this road that I first heard a peculiar crack from the dashboard area. I couldn't find the source, and put it down to the dry plastic rubbing together. I had long ago heard a similar sound and corrected it by tightening up all the dash screws. I could do that at Moreton. Little did I know that this was to be Murphy's hat trick and his coup-de-grâce?

There was no one home at Moreton. The Meehans were at their favourite swimming hole away from the tourist-infested area. We decided to pool our resources and create a dinner that would be ready when they got back. Just about everything was organised when they came home, but they had friends with them for whom we obviously had not catered. Under Helen's supervision and with generous help from her pantry the meal was replanned. And what was left over made breakfast next morning. John decided to take some flashlight photos during dinner, but got carried away by enthusiasm. At one stage he had the camera back to front, which brought hoots of derision and laughter from his subjects.

# Moreton – Coen, 182km

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On Sunday Becky made her first communion. John and Chris applied their welding skills to repairing the right shock mount and we got away at 11.00am, Robert driving. Robert heard the "noise" too, and found its source. The windscreen right pillar was cracking at the bottom corner from under the rubber inwards. Every jolt and jar lengthened the crack a minute amount. Down the road a bit, to relieve the strain we unloaded the roof rack into the car, which helped a little for a while. As the crack lengthened we progressively reduced speed to about 40 km/h and strapped the roof rack to the chassis with a ratchet strap. The strap broke soon after. It was a nightmare drive from then on.

We were not Murphy's only victims. Later that day we passed a Toyota station wagon that had broken a tie-rod end and left the track on a bend. The front left corner was badly damaged, with a broken spring and other problems. One of the passengers had been taken to hospital in Coen. Fortunately a station owner down the track had an old Toyota in the paddock, and gave them the parts they needed to get back on the road. Lucky for them that Toyotas are the predominant 4WD in the north.

We laboured along very bad surfaces to the Archer River roadhouse where we stopped for hamburgers. By this time the crack had extended around the outside of the pillar and was working its way back both inside and outside the car. The big risk was that it would break through entirely, breaking the windscreen and destroying support for the roof. So we had to take things very slowly and keep the bumps down to a minimum. To do this it was necessary to stay around 20 km/h or slower most of the time. At least at that speed you certainly get to see a lot of the countryside.

The road from the Archer River crossing to the Coen airport turnoff has a bad reputation that was fully justified. But then the road into Archer River had not been anything I could recommend.

At 6.30pm we limped into Coen and made camp in the campground beside Merv and Irene Williams's general store. They were away fishing, so we said hello to Lisa, their daughter, and managed to get just one beer at the local pub before it closed.

We cooked soup for dinner in the church where Chris applied his electrician's "magic" training to make a fluorescent light work for Len. At least Len thought at the time that it was magic. Len had the sense to sleep in the church, but the rest of us slept under the stars as usual, and under a very heavy dew as well, that thoroughly wet the sleeping bags.

I was first in the queue that builds up outside the only service station in Coen every day. What I hoped to do was get the crack welded temporarily for safe transit to Cairns. The mechanic had been down to Cairns for the weekend but was due to open up as usual on this Monday morning. Except that there is no such thing as "usual" up there. You take things as they come.

At 8.30, long after I had wanted to be on the road, there was still no sight of any mechanic. I found the service station owner in the attached store, not terribly concerned that his workshop was still closed for business. He had a look at the crack, pronounced it not repairable with his facilities, and suggested the only alternative - I carry on to Cairns very carefully.

## Coen – Laura, 247km

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There are sections of the northern highway that are less than horror stretches, and the 30 or so kilometres south of Coen were quite good at the time of writing. When we left this though, it was down to an average 20 km/h, even driving off the road where graders had left shoulders smoother than the corrugated road. Len and Robert, following some distance behind, reckoned my tracks were interesting and must have caused some speculation on the part of other drivers unaware of my problem.

The itinerary had included the Lakefield National Park, but that was now entirely out of the question. Simply getting back to Cairns safely was our sole objective.

We couldn't pass Bamboo without calling in on Snow and Valda, and it was about morning tea time when we got there. The crack was now about 50% through the pillar, and needed further restraining. So we tied rope from the front corners of the roof rack in a straight line down to the bull bar. This applied tension in the opposite direction to the way the crack was spreading, and seemed to do some good. I am sure it slowed down the destructive process. By this time it was lunchtime, and Valda wouldn't let us go until she had fed us yet again.

Also at Bamboo at this time, and just getting organised to depart, was a German tourist on a motorbike. He had invited himself in the previous evening for a meal and a safe campsite. He was amazed at how freely he could travel around Australia without being forced by police to move on, and had no qualms about grabbing hospitality where he could.

Despite what any locals might say, I found the road past Bamboo and Musgrave as bad as any in the area. As well as having a moonscape surface it had dips that swallowed cars whole and it frequently changed direction in the bottom of the dip. Most of the dips are not advertised, so we were especially cautious entering those with signs as we figured that they must be really worth the warning. Generally, though, it was the unmarked ones that were the worst.

There is a new roadhouse at the Hann River, on property excised from Kalinga station and run by Gail and Greg Turner formerly of Kalinga. Here I found that Murphy wasn't concentrating solely on me. There was a newer Nissan long wheelbase station wagon there whose front axle had split like an

orange peel at the diff housing on the short axle side, splaying the wheels out and doing dreadful things to the front-end geometry. What a mess. At least I was still mobile.

The story could get a bit monotonous here because it was just more of the same out of Hann River. Bad road, 20 kilometres per hour, and nearly 7.00pm by the time we crawled into Laura.

There isn't much at Laura, but worth visiting there if you pass that way is the Quinkan Hotel with an excellent little eat-in/take-away restaurant just added to it (Mary's Kitchen?), and of course Bill Cross's store and petrol bowsers.

We slept in Bill's old corrugated iron igloo, which at least was drier than the previous night. Yet another example of the hospitality showered on us throughout the trip. Len had known Bill for years, and I had stayed in his house on a previous visit. It's a small world, and the people up north get around. We had run into Bill Cross at the Golf Club in Weipa when we went with Father Flynn for dinner.

# Laura – Cairns, 308 km

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## Murphy, Vegemite and plum jam

Up till now we had essentially been driving in a two-vehicle convoy. Sometimes we would have left ahead of Len, but always, after he passed us, he would wait at several spots for us to catch up, and that didn't contribute to rapid transit. So, to hasten our arrival back at Cairns, Chris and I left Laura at 6.30am on the Tuesday, with Len to follow in his own good time.

There is only one road, and if we broke down we would still be there when Len came by. If we didn't break down, we would be that much further ahead than if we waited to leave with Len.

There is a magnificent stretch of road south of Laura, just as at Coen. It will be interesting to see these roads in a few years, after wet seasons and road transports have wreaked their vengeance on them. Hopefully they are the beginning of a good road system for the far north.

Not far south of Laura, past the good stretch of road, are some aboriginal cave paintings at the Split Rock Galleries. They are still promoted as being of some significance, but they are not protected from vandals or natural destructive forces and have deteriorated markedly since I saw them in 1984. They are really no longer worth the effort it takes to get to them, but we didn't know that until we had pulled off the road and climbed the mountain on foot.

We met the Cairns to Cooktown road at Lakeland. The soil here is rich but the property, Lakeland Downs, has had a turbulent past. After years of adversity, including an attempt by a Vietnamese community to grow peanuts, it appears at last to have an economic future.

It was 10.30 by the time we reached Palmer River roadhouse and we booked our breakfast at the bar before I went back into the kitchen to say hello to Luba. In the course of conversation she asked if the breakfasts she was making were ours and I said yes. Then I went out to join Chris in the dining room. When the breakfasts arrived they almost needed two plates each, there was so much to eat. It's a great place, that Palmer River roadhouse.

At 11.15 we were on the last 36 kilometre stretch of gravel road, actually broken into two sections with about 5 kilometres of good bitumen at almost the mid-point. 560 kilometres and two days after discovering the crack, we

drove onto bitumen north of Mount Carbine at 1.00pm and our troubles were virtually over. But, by this time, the crack had extended through about 80% of the pillar. The only unbroken section was the surface facing the rear of the car. On the hard, smooth bitumen we could drive safely at 100k once again.

Mount Carbine has been a small mining community supported by the wolfram mine opposite the hotel. Roadhouses seem to be the flavour of the year, and a new one was about to be opened there within a couple of days. Timing was excellent. I had told Len we would not go past the Wolfram Hotel in Mount Carbine if we were still ahead of him at that point. He and Robert arrived just as I was finishing my drink, and with Chris now driving we headed off in convoy again for Cairns and true civilisation.

I thought the situation desperate enough to warrant driving straight to a panel beater, and Len knew a good one. He has, on occasion, needed one himself over the past few years. So, at 4.00pm on Tuesday 25th August, NOR'Q-87 ignominiously and prematurely ended at Comino and Strike panel beaters.

They said they could start work on the Nissan at 8.00am next day, which they did, and I had the vehicle back at lunchtime on Friday with a perfect repair job. But on the Tuesday we then repaired to Len's unit to unpack and clean up. Here I found that Murphy, bloody Murphy, was twisting the knife before he finally gave up.

In the fridge the vegemite lid, still full of vegemite, was wedged fully inside the plum jam lid still as full as possible with plum jam. And most of the remaining vegemite and plum jam smeared all interior surfaces of the fridge and everything inside. OK, that was easy to clean, but the first aid kit was a different story with a bottle of calamine lotion emptied and gone hard over everything from bandages to the zip of the first aid case. In the sanctuary of Len's abode I said a few unprintable things to Murphy, and then promised him I would **never** go to Cape York again.

We had covered 3079 kilometres since departing Cairns for Chillagoe, and 7595 kilometres since Canberra. Fuel used since Canberra was 995 litres, giving me 13 litres per 100 km fuel consumption for a total cost of \$550.

On the corner of Spence and Grafton streets in Cairns is Lloyds Pizza House. Don't be misled; it is not just another pizza parlour. It's also a BYO curry house par excellence, and we took Len there for dinner on Wednesday night for his good job well done in the face of such adversity.



None of the trips he does alone is ever quite like that one. NOR'Q-87 was ended, but we still had to get back to Canberra. Robert elected to get a coach home rather than wait, and we saw him off on the Thursday. Chris and I left at 4.00am on the Saturday and drove to Blackwater. You are not expected to know where that is without an atlas. It is west of Rockhampton, and we went there via Marion, Nebo and Dingo.

It was a long day, with 15 hours driving for 1107 kilometres. Chris's friends, Robert and Lee Metcalf are based there now working in the coalmines. There is an almost continuous stream of coal trains pouring out of the place, each a nominal 100 trucks long with four or five engines. A train that long takes a long time to pass any given point. After an overnight stay I left Chris to go on to Brisbane, where he would meet me on the Wednesday morning for the run home to Canberra.

That was another long day. Chris came in by coach from Rockhampton, and we left Brisbane at 6.00am. Canberra was freezing again when we parked the Nissan at 9.50pm, 1300 kilometres later.

Final important statistics were: 10859 kilometres travelled, 1580 litres of fuel used, and \$780 paid for fuel.

It was a great trip.

# North Queensland Tour — August and September 1984

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(Terry and Andrew Bibo)

I set out from Canberra on July 31 1984 for the top of Cape York in the Nissan MQ Patrol hardtop as it's called, and as the story will reveal I was to be very grateful for the 'hardtop' before the trip was over.

Highways are highways, and there is no point on elaborating on the road from here to Cairns. Suffice to say that there is a lot of work going on in various places in the bicentennial project, and there is a lot of road out of Goondoonwindi that isn't getting needed attention. Some of the language of the truckies in describing it was almost enough to scorch it.

Cairns is about the last outpost of real civilisation in the north of our banana republic, so I'll start from there. Andrew flew up for the school holidays and I picked him up on a Saturday morning and drove back to Cooktown where I'd been staying with my brother. So from then on we had a convoy of two vehicles and a total of three people. For a while Andrew swapped between cars to give us both the benefit of his wisdom, but he soon found he preferred my air-conditioned comfort to the cross-flow dust in his uncle's Toyota.

Distance wise there's no difference in going to Cooktown via Mareebra or Mt Molloy, though that may be irrelevant now that the Daintree road is finally open. I think I'd be inclined to check that road out next time I go up.

It's about 325 km to Cooktown and the first 170 of that is good bitumen. The rest can vary from a horror stretch to just bad gravel depending on when it was last graded, and what the previous wet season did to it. It really wasn't too bad this time and I covered it four times in a couple of weeks. Even the gravel stretch has two good bitumen lengths, each about 5km.

Louie Komsic runs the Palmer River Roadhouse 113 km south of Cooktown and it's well worth stopping there for a feed or a drink or both. He has a small museum of local artifacts and gold that he has collected over the years and is quite an authority on the area. Lakeland, closer to Cooktown boasts a larger community and some years ago served a Vietnamese group who tried unsuccessfully to get peanuts to grow in the area. Stopping at Louie's each

time I had no occasion to check out the facilities at Lakeland, but I believe they are at least adequate.

Family ties kept me in Cooktown for a month, but honestly I think half a day should be more than enough to see everything. It's a much prettier place on photo than in fact. Worth visiting is the James Cook Memorial Museum. Ian McKinna runs it for the National Trust and he's a nice bloke; owns a Land Rover. Fishing there can be good if you can put up with the wind. The locals say it drives them mad and the sergeant of police says they're half mad to live there anyway.

It's about 200 km to Laura from Cooktown along the Battle Camp road, which is quite a scenic drive for a 4wd. The road is public access, but a portion of it is claimed by a fellow called the "Mad Frenchman" who has been known to bail up tourists with fairly intimidating threats. He's just one of the oddball characters up there. The place is full of interesting individuals. The Mad Frenchman drives a Toyota Landcruiser that's more iron oxide than iron, and considering the way he drives it and the condition of the roads it says a lot for Toyotas in the tropics.

Laura doesn't boast much except a store, a pub, fuel at 55 c/L, and a very small community — and lots of dust. The thing that connects Laura with the top of Australia is called The Peninsula Development Road. In patches it's almost good, and in others excellent, which can lull you into a false sense of security because some of the worst 'road' I've ever been on, is the stretch south of Coen. It can do dreadful things to cartons of long-life milk. Four of mine pounded each other to a pulp in the refrigerator just going over the corrugations before we got to Coen.

Unless you intend to go to Weipa it is essential to refuel at Coen or have enough fuel to get to Bamaga at the top, because there is no more fuel available along the way. This is reflected in the price of diesel fuel at Coen. At 59 c/L it was the most I had to pay on the entire trip of over 10,000 km. Coen has two stores, a pub, a mechanic and even a cafe of sorts. Speaking from experience I can't recommend it. Probably the most talked about feature of Coen is the pub name.

Officially the 'Exchange' Hotel it has had a prominent 'S' affixed to the name, which is equally prominently displayed against the skyline. Camping is available at Coen at the main store run by Irene Williams if you need a hot shower, but if you can do without that, the riverbank a few kilometres out of town is a very pleasant spot. An even more popular spot is the bank of the Archer River

some 65km further on. It's wise to get to camping stops early because they get crowded, and after dark it can be difficult finding a reasonable place to park. In this respect it may pay to consider some statistics.

The authorities were expecting 5,000 vehicles up to the top in the 1984 season. The season lasts nominally from June through October. Each month 1,000 vehicles would be looking for a place to park. I'll leave any further breakdown to you to calculate. But I must say that the occupants of 5,000 4wd vehicles create a lot of rubbish and excrement. Not many of the tourists, or 'terrorists' as they are known up there, have the discipline we encourage and practice in the 4WD Club. Consequently the campsites are pretty quickly littered with garbage and the sand strewn with little pink flags.

Don't walk around barefoot in the dark! It takes a good rainy season to clean up after the grots.

We went to Weipa, and I think if you go to the top you'd be doing yourself a dis-service not to go and see the place. It's a beautiful little town with full facilities but not too much competition. Don't expect to buy fuel there on a Sunday. There is only one outlet and it keeps just about public service business hours.

Comalco [now Rio Tinto Alcan, from 2007] runs free conducted tours every day, and it's quite an eye-opener to see the magnitude of the mining if you've never been exposed to that sort of thing before. Even the greenies couldn't tell where the reclamation has taken place since the company got away from planting trees in straight lines.

The road to Weipa is signposted so don't be tempted to take the original track south of the main road as we were unless you want some of the best off-road work you'll ever get up there. Towards Weipa town where the company assumes responsibility for roads it is a multi lane highway with speed limited only by the imagination. It really gives you a good impression of the place.

Once in Weipa there is not much point in coming out the same way. So we went out on the northern road through York Downs to Batavia Downs to pick up the Peninsula Development Road once more.

The Wenlock River is the first watercourse to be forded just south of Moreton Telegraph Station. It was no problem, but every year would be different with all rivers depending on the previous wet. This is the next logical camp and it's just as well to make the most of it because that's where the Development Road

ceases. Some nice yabbies were coming out of the Wenlock River. I had one bigger than a banana prawn and just as tasty.

The grader does not operate north of the Wenlock River, and for the next 250 odd kilometres I reckon we averaged around 20 km per hour. When I got to 40 I thought I was breaking the sound barrier.

It is great country, and scenic in its own right but it offers most of the obstacles you might like to see on a driver-training course. Curly creek crossings with mud, rock, or deep sand climb-outs; long stretches of deep soft sand; corru-bloody-gations like I've never seen before. General it was necessary to do between 60 and 80 kph to ride over the corrugations, but of course that was not always possible because of other obstacles. And so it developed into a slow grind all the way.

The moral of the story is don't plan on making good time between the Wenlock River and the Jardine River, which represents the northern boundary of the obstacle course. Other obstacles worthy of mention are the Gunshot and Cockatoo creeks. Gunshot especially is liable to be a problem southbound after rain with a steep rutted muddy climb out.

Depending on progress, the Dulhunty offers excellent camping and swimming before negotiating the heathlands. Further north again and within easy distance of the top – well almost – is Elliot Creek. It's off to the east and not signposted, but it's on the maps, and I can only recommend it as one of the most beautiful little creeks I've seen. I plan to spend more time there next time I go north.

The last major obstacle to getting to the top is the Jardine River. From there it's only about 40km to Bamaga, The Jardine River is perennial, has a very high water flow that I can't remember. and is excellent to drink. In fact I brought a lot of it home with me it was that good.

Some of the more intrepid drivers cross the Jardine River the hard way. Me, I paid my \$20 each way and went over on the pontoon. The pontoon only operates from June through October so if you go out of that time bracket there should be no temptation to spend the extra \$40 to save getting wet, But of course if you went out of the accepted season you'd be risking the entire trip on the vagaries of 'THE WET' anyway.

Bamaga is an aboriginal and islander settlement that forms Australia's true northern outpost. It is served by boat or barge and has a good airstrip, which

served the RAAF during the war and is known as Jacky Jacky airstrip or Higginsfield. Now Air Queensland and the coastal surveillance flights use it.

You can refuel and replenish provisions at Bamaga, but only during normal business hours if I remember rightly. We had enough fuel to do the return trip, and that was with just two jerry cans and a tank full out of Weipa. So fuel isn't really a problem unless you have a thirsty car or one of those ridiculous little Toyota petrol tanks that I had on my short wheelbase Landcruiser.

We were fortunate in having accommodation available in Bamaga and made a day trip to Cape York, Somerset and Punsand Bay.

Historically Cape York and Somerset are the highlights. But Punsand Bay on the western side of the peninsula is a magnificent stretch of clean golden sand that seems to stretch out to infinity.

Somerset is also a beautiful place to camp, offering excellent swimming and good fishing in a very attractive setting. For anyone staying in the area it would seem to me to be the ideal place to camp after provisioning at Bamaga. The road to Somerset is well pounded, but not so the road to Punsand Bay. I had my doubts at times that we were not lost and the local topographical map didn't help much. There are a few confusing tracks, but perseverance paid off. Anyway it isn't such a big place to get lost in.

For the return to Cairns, we decided not to retrace our steps exactly and so we turned off at Musgrave to come the rest of the way through the Lakefield National Park. It requires the Ranger's authority to camp in the park and this should be obtained by phone from Musgrave if not already arranged. There is a vast variety of country in the park from extensive lagoons of lotus to the graveyard effect of thousands of magnetic termite mounds from horizon to horizon. There are also real live crocodiles in the rivers and lagoons and ample signs warning of the dangers of swimming in the area. We saw three crocs in the one hole when we stopped for a bit of fishing over lunchtime. Wild pigs are also common enough to be a traffic hazard. Bird life in the form of brolgas and thousands of cockatoos add to the scenery and the noise.

A great place to camp on the way home is the Hann Crossing on the North Kennedy River. It is well served by the rangers with bins and has a choice of about 4 or 5 campsites spread over a few kilometres. It's a popular spot with the outback tour groups but big enough not to get crowded.

That just about gets us back to Cooktown. And it was just half an hour out of town on the dreaded Battle Camp road that I was to appreciate how well the

Patrol is built. We had a slight difference of opinion with the direction a road should take and ended up off the road in a big hole. The front end of the car was cradled in the roots of a big tree and the roof rack was resting on the bole of the same tree while the rear right wheel was a few feet above the road. Spectacular but not too damaging, The roof rack mounted on the hardtop the way it is on the Patrol took all the strain and prevented what would have otherwise been far more severe damage. Fortunately we were able to winch out and continue without much more than wounded pride and an hour and a half delay.

So for anyone intending to go to the top I would say plan to be totally self sufficient for at least the Weipa – Cape York – Coen section; check with the locals on road conditions and local diversions; be a bit inquisitive and look of the regular beaten track; above all enjoy yourself.

# Newsletters For The North Queensland Safari

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## NORQ '87

NEWSLETTER FOR THE NORTH QUEENSLAND SAFARI

#1 – 31 AUGUST 1985

*North Queensland as a land of*

*SUN*

*SAND*

*SIGHTS*

*has to be seen to be appreciated.*

*Len sees it all the time and appreciates it enough to live there and travel extensively over it. Andrew and I have seen parts of it twice and I appreciate it enough to want to go back and tour it again before it is despoiled by commercial tourism who effectively grott the beaten tracks up in between the rainy seasons.*

*So I am proposing a small safari to a few Bibos together with interested friends to go to the top of Cape York Peninsula in August 1987. Having been there under Len's guidance I can only highly recommend the trip to anyone wanting a largely back-to-nature holiday from the routine of city living.*

*It shouldn't be an expensive trip. For background information I've included my 1984 itinerary and a report I wrote for the Land Rover Club of the A.C.T. That wasn't written as a tourist blurb, but as advice for club members, so you might find it a bit dry. Also, I left out a lot of the best parts and the 'personality' side of it so as to not encourage strangers to go calling on Len's friends at stations up there in the hope of exploiting their hospitality.*

*This first newsletter is just to determine who might be interested and what vehicles we might have. And it gives you a chance to plan ahead in booking recreation leave.*

*Very loosely at this stage I would plan on spending a couple/few days getting to Cairns by driving in shifts. We'd need to lay-over there for a day*



*or so to organize provisions etc. then the best part of three weeks on the trail with some few days left for the drive back south. At this stage individuals could break off the rush home by coach or airline if necessary. Or, if we have more time we could wend our way back leisurely to various homes. I hope to take leave without pay to enable an easy trip.*

*So far we have my Patrol with room for 2 (or 3 at the most) passengers; Robert's Patrol with the same; hopefully Len's official Landcruiser with room for one; and the possibility of Barry's Range Rover (any room?). Not counting drivers who are rather essential to the operation we have room for 5 to 7 passengers in the first three vehicles at this early stage. If passengers exceed available space we'd have to look a drastic options of either hiring or buying-using-reselling a local 4WD from wherever we could get a good deal. I hope it doesn't come to that. Perhaps someone will buy a 4WD in the meantime.*

*The first distribution list includes: Bernard Bibo, David Bibo, John Bibo, Len Bibo, Robert Bibo, Terry Bibo, Tony Bibo, Chris Bunt, Joe Gangemi, Barry Runnstrom, Joe Stirzaker.*

*Tear here*

- A definite goer*
- Interested*
- Count me out*

*Comments:*

# NORQ '87

NEWSLETTER FOR THE NORTH QUEENSLAND SAFARI

#2 – 3 JANUARY 1986

Well, it's been four months since issue 1 went to press and a progress report is due. So far we are planning on having:

- John & Betty plus Neil & Gwen from Melbourne in a Range Rover
- Barry & Judith from Canberra in a Range Rover
- Robert, with David & Cheryl from Canberra in a Patrol
- Terry, with Chris from Canberra in a Patrol
- Len from Cairns in a Toyota

Hiring a vehicle is now out of the question and there is room for two more participants, one with Len and one with me. I'm carrying a small safety margin in case Len is not available with a company car at the time. In that case he and his passenger would overflow into Robert's and my cars giving us four persons per car. That's not comfortable, but it would work as an alternative is offloading someone at the last minute.

Allocation of passengers to vehicles is as above for the purpose of planning ahead as to what to take, and precisely how much leave to take etc. For example, hand suitcases will not be allowed in my car. Soft army packs or similar will be the thing. Of course passengers can swap around as much as they like on the actual trip and probably will, for the sake of variety and socialising.

A rough itinerary at this stage would be: Cairns – Cooktown – Laura – Lakefield National Park – Edward River – Coen – Weipa – Bamaga and the top, including a side trip overnight to Thursday Island – Iron Range – Cairns.

I'll work out a more detailed itinerary in March with Len, covering possible overnight locations, side trips to cave paintings, historic sites etc. In the meantime let me have any suggestions you would like to see included.

Maps for the area for preplanning are the RACQ QDM1 (Cape York, Peninsula), RACQ QDM3 (Townsville, Cairns) and RACQ Cairns City. These should be available through your local RACQ equivalent. A recently released Amazing Gulf Country map will be ideal for each vehicle on the trip. This may be available through your local Queensland Government Tourist Bureau, but

we'll pick it up in Cairns at the last minute if we have to. Len will have all the really necessary fine detailed topographical maps of any areas we cover.

It isn't too soon to start thinking about spares. I know all we northerners are comfortable, because we are in the game regularly. A worthwhile book is Gregory's FOUR WHEEL DRIVE HANDBOOK, available almost anywhere. It has to be good. The Land Rover Club of the ACT produced it. For the southerners, Robert, Barry, Len and I will probably have enough recovery gear between us to cover a larger expedition, but I think at least two (2) spare wheels are a must. Other thoughts should cover fuel cans, water cans, lots of room for food, and a 12-volt or dual 12-volt and gas fridge. If the former, then a spare battery or separate isolated battery. I found a tarpaulin sufficient for camping cover, but will take a light tent just in case. A CB radio is just about essential, from both a social and safety point of view.

We certainly don't want to make this a formal over-organised and uncomfortable trip for anyone, but I think we need guidelines. So I propose the following Articles of Understanding for everyone's consideration. PLEASE let me hear comment, for and/or against, so we all know where we stand.

- Getting to Cairns is the responsibility of each vehicle and its passengers in terms of cost, time, fuel and accommodation. Hopefully we will be able to travel in some form of convoy on pairs.
- Getting back from Cairns is the same.
- Food is the responsibility of each vehicle. This should ensure that no single person has to shoulder the burden of feeding the multitude. Also, it should contribute to variety when we probably share it around at mealtime. Planning of food stores will be a major headache in this trip and we'll have to give it more serious thought after production of the detailed itinerary with replenishment stops. I imagine food will take up most space in any vehicle. Apart from people, that is.
- Fuel all participants will contribute an equal amount to a kitty to cover all fuel for all vehicles from Cairns back to Cairns. We are all going to enjoy the benefits and I don't want to see unequal burdens on owners depending on their passenger loadings or petrol/diesel power. I hope that's not too controversial.

- Repairs & Damages are the sole responsibility of the owner of the vehicle. That's why we carry insurance for and participation in the trip will signify acceptance of this article. Of course, owners can make side arrangements with their passengers or vice versa.

Well I'm looking forward to 1987. I hope to hear from everyone over the next few months while I work on some more details.

# NORQ '87

NEWSLETTER FOR THE NORTH QUEENSLAND SAFARI

#3 – 17 AUGUST 1986

It seems a long time since the last newsletter, and a lot has happened in that time down here. Robert and I have been on a 16-day safari across the Simpson Desert and down through Sturt's Stony Desert. It was very interesting, an excellent trial for the longer one next year, and far more rugged than next year's will be.

There have been some minor changes in the content of our party. We are now planning on having:

- John & Betty plus Neil & Gwen from Melbourne in a Range Rover
- Barry & Judith from Canberra in a Range Rover
- Robert, with David & maybe Andrew from Canberra in a Patrol
- Terry, with Chris from Canberra in a Patrol
- Len from Cairns in a Toyota
- Mike with Mark from Brisbane in a Pajero. Hope they can make it.

Len and I had a good look at the area and have come up with the attached itinerary. It allows for a lot of sightseeing and a fairly leisurely travel burden. If anything, it might be a bit too relaxed, so please have a look at it and see if it fits in with what you would like to do and see. I have already booked my leave for the entire period, but anyone who cannot manage the whole month for any reason may decide to opt out of part of the trip. Robert may have trouble getting an early start because of Budget Day. That's the real budget not his personal one. Anyway we have time to look at that.

We overdid the recovery gear a bit on the Simpson Desert trip and I have produced the following list of recovery gear and responsible person for this trip.

- Hi-lift jacks – Terry and Len
- Axe – Barry
- Spade – everyone
- Electric winch – Barry
- Tirfor winch – Terry or Len
- Steel cable – Len

- Stratch straps & D shackles – everyone who has them
- Bow saw – Terry

Everyone to carry!

- Two spare wheels or two spare cases or a combination of both. It is wise to have a spare to continue with after the first spare splits or gets a puncture.
- Tool kit.
- Radiator hoses and fan belts as required.
- Air / oil/ fuel filters. Parts of the country can be dusty and fuel contamination is always a possibility.
- Fire extinguisher.
- First Aid kit with insect repellent and sun protection cream.

I was asked what would happen in the unlikely event that one of the vehicles breaks down. Hopefully that won't happen if all our vehicles are properly serviced before we start, but I accept that ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN. So in a nutshell, what will happen is that the day of the breakdown and the next 24 hours will be spent trying to get the vehicle mobile or, if that is patently not possible, in getting it to a safe place (e.g. station, township, police station) where it will be temporarily abandoned. The occupants will be accommodated in other vehicles for the remainder of the trip, if possible, and the vehicle recovered at the end of the month.

Obviously this is a very general solution to a breakdown and would be modified by circumstances, but it means that one breakdown will not negate the remainder of the trip for everyone.

Finally, any figure ending in zero in the itinerary is approximate. It is for planning purposes only. The fuel rates and number of litres are a “worst case” estimate for my diesel. My Patrol consumes around 14.5 L/100km on a 4WD trip and less on a varied trip. I hope to have some recent fuel cost figures soon and will forward any separately. But the worst we paid on the Simpson Desert trip was 71 c/L at Innaminka. I have heard, though, that fuel was 84 c/L in North Queensland.

Roll on '87.

# NORQ '87

NEWSLETTER FOR THE NORTH QUEENSLAND SAFARI

#4 – 4 MAY 1987

I hope that after a few abortive attempts this one will be successful in producing the last newsletter for this venture. The party is smaller than last reported, with Michael Bibbo not joining us because of study commitments in Brisbane and Andrew for the same reason in Canberra. And to think that in the beginning I was concerned that we might have to hire a car to cater for the expected enthusiasts! It is now obviously a question of quality not quantity. With 5 vehicles and 11 people we are a comfortable size and should more easily fit into campsites and convoy.

The only changes to the itinerary at this stage are in terms of timing. I had planned on staying overnight at Agnew and Bramwell on the way from Weipa to Bamaga. After discussion with Len in his capacity as Senior Navigator I have decided to leave those two nights open. It seems the country around there may not warrant that much time being spent in it. Len has not travelled over that particular route and cannot recommend it as an area he knows to be worthwhile. So we might stay a little longer in Weipa and do day trips out into that part, returning to an established campsite each night. Or we can push straight through to Bamaga with more time in the top end.

Having planned to overnight on Thursday Island from Bamaga, I think an extra night here may not go astray. I am not happy at the thought of leaving our vehicles unattended at Bamaga while we all go to T.I. If we all want to go it may mean we have to split into two groups for security and that will mean a longer stay at Bamaga. These little problems we can discuss and solve on the spot. After all, the trip has to be flexible up to a point. There are two ferries operating to T.I. with the fares about \$40 return.

Fuel will be reasonably expensive from Coen northwards - over 70 c/L. On the highway north to Cairns fuel prices vary considerably and can be competitive if you pick your refuelling stops carefully. I found diesel down to 45 c/L recently in the Innisfail area. The most frequent good price was around 48 c/L at numerous places all the way from Canberra to Cairns and that was only a couple of months ago. Petrol prices should vary in the same order as diesel I expect.

The National Parks Service is producing more up to date maps of some areas we cover and these will be available in Cairns. Also we will pick up the phone numbers and contact points for the rangers with whom we have to check in for camping permits.

Accommodation in Cairns should not be a problem as there are a number of good caravan parks within reasonable distance of Len's unit. I don't think it will be necessary to book in advance, but anybody who is worried might like to check with Len about booking a site.

As this will be the last newsletter I will include Len's addresses, [redacted].

Chris and I are leaving early and will be in Cairns for the last week of July.

See you all in August.