

BACK TO THE BUSH WITH THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL

Valmai Hankel

It's not every day I get invited to drive from Adelaide to Birdsville with the Governor-General, His Excellency Major-General Michael Jeffery.

Regular readers of this column will know of my solo expeditions into the outback, equipped with bottles of wine and appropriate reference books. It was on the basis of my interest in the country and my experience driving on outback tracks that Ian Doyle, organiser of the Adelaide to Birdsville leg of the Year of the Outback 2006 *Back to the Bush – Bridging the Divide* journey with the Governor-General, invited me to join the group as a driver and guide. So on Wednesday 10 May at 7 30 am, there I was, at Government House, Adelaide, sitting in the front seat of the Governor General's car, not as the driver but as a provider of local information on the first leg from Adelaide to Port Augusta.

The journey had several objectives. One was to make the 85% of people who live on the coastal fringe more aware of life in the outback, and to encourage them to visit. Another was to listen to the concerns of people living in the outback. It was believed to be the first time that a Governor-General had travelled to South Australia's far north. There were up to 11 vehicles and some 43 people, including the Governor-General's party, federal and state police, media, and directors of the Australian Outback Development Consortium, including its Patron and songwriter, His Honour Ted Egan, Administrator of the Northern Territory.

With a police car far ahead of the pack, we headed up the Port Wakefield Road for the first official stop at the Wadlata Outback Centre at Port Augusta. We all poured out of our vehicles and wandered around the impressive displays before driving off to the Australian Arid Lands Botanic Gardens, spectacular even without its eremophilas blooming. In Quorn, the GG happily took the controls of the 100-years-old steam motor coach, the Coffee Pot. The night was spent in great comfort at the Wilpena Pound Resort, where we luxuriated in the hospitality of Keith and Lynette Rasheed – Keith was also one of the driver/guides.

The following morning, after a stop at Razorback Lookout near Brachina Gorge, and a graphic demonstration by guide Lorraine Edmunds using a telephone directory to show the geological formation of the Flinders Ranges, the convoy made its way to Parachilna, Beltana and Leigh Creek. After a visit to the Aboriginal community at Nepabunna we spent the night camped at the Coulthard family's Aboriginal tourism venture at Iga Warta. Next day we headed for Farina, Marree, and at last swung on to the Birdsville Track. Most of us, including the Governor-General, spent that night in comfortable swags in Cattle Drive tents at Dulkaninna Station provided by the SA Tourism Commission. The last day took us to Mungerannie Station, about midway up the Track, and then on to

the banks of the Diamantina River, where we were joined by the Governor-General's wife, Marlena Jeffery. Diamantina Shire Council dignitaries welcomed us with damper and tea. Next morning the Governor-General and the interstate part of the entourage flew to Charleville, while the remaining South Australians turned back home.

Planned with military precision, the expedition had many highlights. For me they included hearing the Adnyamathanha Women's Choir enthusiastically perform at Nepabunna; sitting around the campfire listening to members of the Coulthard family sing in both their own language and English; and later at Dulkaninna Station around another campfire, listening to Ted Egan sing his evocative 'Drover's boy'. I've heard it many times, but never sung so movingly. It was special meeting some of the families of the Birdsville Track, past whose homes I'd driven on many occasions.

There was no shortage of hearty Aussie fare to tuck into, such as Jane Fargher's famous feral antipasto – camel metwurst, smoked roo, and wattle seed chicken, at Beltana; delicious quandong tarts from Fiona Gosse, (a former PA to Malcolm Fraser, now running the bakery at Copley), washed down with billy tea in the shady camping ground at Farina; damper and quandong jam at Iga Warta; station beef and the rare South African dorpa sheep, cooked in camp ovens at Dulkaninna; superb sandwiches at Mungerannie; and a meal of OBE beef for some 250 people at Birdsville, after which some of us unfortunately over-indulged in wine at the pub. Locally named 'Diamantina Barra' (callop) provided a fine farewell breakfast at the Birdsville Caravan Park.

Many of the wines came from Peter Lehmann, including the stunning 2001 Eight Songs Shiraz (about \$40), full of blackberryish fruit, of great length, 1998 Black Queen Sparkling Shiraz (about \$35), especially yummy around the campfire late on a cold evening, and 2003 Barossa Cabernet Sauvignon (about \$18), elegant and very moreish. There were also very drinkable reds from the RGS Wine Club (about \$8) made by Michael Potts at Bleasdale.

Despite some criticisms that the whole exercise was an expensive rort, it was not seen like that by the locals. They were genuinely pleased the Governor-General made the effort to visit them. He listened to their concerns about such matters as poor roads and lack of infrastructure and he made notes to take back to Canberra for action.

I was honoured to be a part of a most memorable journey.