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BY CORSEEN BATHURST

INTO THE OUTBACK BY 6WD



Does the idea of exploring outback Australia appeal to you? Visualise driving through endless open spaces, no traffic to worry about, absolute peace and quiet, in an environment totally different from New Zealand. But reality usually kicks in.

Sure, people do embark on an outback experience in their own 4WD, but venturing into the Australian wilderness is vastly different to driving any of our 4WD routes.

Dirt tracks and total isolation demand careful preparation and extreme caution. Signposts

are sparse, with sand roads wandering off in a confusing number of directions. Few maps show all the tracks. Yes, a GPS would solve that, or you could join an organised Tag-Along trip. However there is another alternative.

I have discovered the

ultimate option: joining a small group tour in a specially adapted ex-army 6WD bus.

You sit back totally relaxed no worries about taking a wrong track. At the end of each day's explorations - after seeing points of interest you probably wouldn't have found yourself -



comfortable accommodation is organised. What about food? It's all provided, right down to morning and afternoon teas. What more could you wish for? In the West Beach suburb of Adelaide, we joined a group of 16, destination: the central Eyre Peninsula and Gawler

Ranges. We marvelled at the comfort of the bus as our driver headed for the outback and Mt Ive Station, 494 km away. Deluxe cruising, looking down on "ordinary" cars from a great height. Mt Ive Station provides amenities; either

accommodated or campsites, for visitors to this remote area which includes nearby Gawler Ranges National Park. This national park was proclaimed in 2002, extending across 163,500 hectares, an expanse with volcanic rock hills over 1,500-million years old.

More recent history can be seen in the preserved Old Paney homestead, a pastoral property from the early 1850s, and the ruins of Pondanna Outstation. We paused to reflect on the very special type of people who settled here. A





plaque outside the Old Paney homestead revealed it was home for a family with 11 children. But it was the wild flowers that captured most of my attention, both within and outside the park. Our tour in early September coincided not only with a spectacular display of the Sturt Desert Pea, but also multi-coloured carpets of other wild flowers.

From Mt Ive Station, private tracks lead to two outstanding highlights: Peter's Pillars (an extensive outcrop of exposed rhyolite) and Lake Gardner. Gardner runs along the northern boundary of the property and in 1991, along with nearby Lakes Everard and Harris, became a national park.

This salt lake of 4,351 sq.km intermittently fills with water and on a few occasions has been used for speed trials. On a stunning blue-sky day, we arrived at the edge of this glittering white expanse, everyone in a rush to take a closer look at the intricate crystallised patterns formed along its edge.

On our second morning at Mt Ive Station, I dashed outside with camera at the ready to capture an outback sunrise.

My choice of silhouettes was limited to a few trees - and three grain silos that somehow seem out of place in this arid environment. There was an almost eerie stillness as vivid red and yellow bands stained the sky, until the blinding yellow ball rose slowly above the horizon.

After two nights at Mt Ive, I know I couldn't cope with a true outback experience. The vastness and desolation is overwhelming, and the thought

of tents and an encounter with a snake is more than enough to scare the living daylights out of me.

And this country has dozens of other totally foreign creepy crawlies, possibly quite harmless, but I wouldn't be hanging around to check them out. Taking the easy option on an accommodated tour is much more my cup of tea - having all the advantages of the experience with none of the responsibilities.

Our tour turned south to Minnipe. This is South Australia's "granite country" with several rock formations known as inselbergs. Phildappa, notable for the unusual wave formation along its edge, is considered similar to Western Australia's Wave Rock.

Phildappa's "flare" structure extends for perhaps 100 metres, the result of complex chemical weathering below the surface. Our guide knew the easiest access route and from the top there's a view that stretches forever, emphasising the flat nature of this vast continent. We found a series of gnamma holes, small rock pools etched in the granite, some still holding water.

On nearby Tcharkuldu Hill an enormous granite dome is littered with huge boulders, many of them hollowed out in weird shapes.

As our bus rolled back into Adelaide, joining thousands of other vehicles on busy highways, we still revelled in looking over fences and down on cars, but sadness was creeping in; our outback adventure was nearing an end.

If readers are keen to tackle



the outback terrain on their own, remember that means daily temperatures in the Gawler Ranges reach 34 deg C in summer, lowering to 17-19C during winter.

Entry and camping permits must be obtained for the national park, and visitors must provide all their own water, fuel and firewood. The majority of tracks within the park are recommended for high clearance 4WD vehicles only, with all tracks and roads likely to become impassable in wet conditions.

For details on Mt Ive Station: www.mtIve.com.au. For information on the Gawler Ranges National Park: www.parks.sa.gov.au/gawler

We travelled with Desert Sky: www.desertskytours.com. Mailing Address: PO Box 683, Glenelg, South Australia 5045. Howard and Jenny Humby run a variety of tours out of Adelaide.

Their experience, love of the outback, and dedication in "going the extra mile" for visitors, gave us a holiday far beyond our expectations. ●

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