

SYDNEY DEPARTURE**DAY 1**

Leaving Sydney about 8.30am we go to the Mt Tomah Botanic Gardens along the Bells Line of Road across the Blue Mountains – arriving in time for Devonshire tea at the Gardens Restaurant. A magnificent view north over the Wollomoi National Park is a pre-cursor for things to come on this journey. Later we will have lunch in or about Molong then leave the Mitchell Highway for Parkes away to the west. Following this alternate route to Narromine we pass through beautiful wheat fields in the late afternoon – also catching a glimpse of the Parkes Radio Telescope on the way. Dinner this evening at Buxees Restaurant where Bev and Vicki are our hosts.

NARROMINE TO WHITE CLIFFS**DAY 2**

By this evening we will reach White Cliffs and the Underground Motel. Stopping first at Nyngan where those who want one will be provided with their copy of their preferred daily newspaper. Then 150km or so west on the Barrier Highway to Cobar where we take a tour of the District Museum in the beautiful old Mine Manager's residence. The museum will then provide us with lunch in the sheltered picnic park adjacent to the old residence. After lunch the 'long hop', 250km further west to the neglected town of Wilcannia on the banks of the Darling River beyond the 15km flat expanse which still carries the misnomer of the 'Darling River Flood Plain'. We will travel around Wilcannia for a view of magnificent old buildings like the Francis Greenway designed hospital, the Police Station/Court House complex, bond stores along the river bank and the Post Office. Perhaps the old Convent Building, collapsing further with the passing of each year, is a sign of the final end which this once wonderful town is facing. Leaving the Barrier Highway late in the afternoon we travel north into somewhat more hilly country for 100km to the once thriving opal mining village of White Cliffs. No en-suites in any of the rooms in our Underground Motel – apparently it is against the law to have such convenience as flowing water below the ground in these places.

WHITE CLIFFS TO TIBOOBURRA**DAY 3**

With time on our side this morning (only 300km or less up to Tibooburra today) we have a guided tour around the old White Cliffs diggings and other places of interest – stopping for morning tea at the tiny corner store before departing north. As soon as we drive out of White Cliffs the sense of travelling 'into the Outback' is palpable. It is not so much the gravel road we now follow – rather it is the expansive horizon that so quickly opens up on every side of the moving coach. After an hour or two we join the Silver City Highway, a sometimes bitumen road that joins Broken Hill and Tibooburra. 40km after our intersection with this highway we make the 1km detour down to Milparinka – and from there out to Depot Glen, the site made famous by Charles Sturt who camped there on an early journey of exploration in 1844. Back to Milparinka for lunch at the hotel – only one of two occupied buildings at this place the hotel was first licensed in 1881. This is stony country and the many outcrops of white quartz once indicated, perhaps unfairly, the prospect of much gold in the region. It is only another 40km from Milparinka to Tibooburra where we will spend an evening in the Granites Motel. Dinner this evening will be in the more substantial Tibooburra Hotel. But do not miss the opportunity to visit the Family Hotel across the road – a licensed premises once owned by the artist Clifton Pugh and still many of its walls decorated with the work of Clifton and colleagues including Russell Drysdale.

TIBOOBURRA TO INNAMINCKA**DAY 4**

Today we follow the 'short route' (400km) from Tibooburra up to Innamincka. The first feature this morning is the climb up a substantial 'jump-up' north of Tibooburra. Beyond this 'jump-up' the

country is again flat as before – but now perhaps more than 50m higher than back down the road. Soon crossing the border into Queensland one is left with the conclusion that Queensland here is quite a bit higher than New South Wales. We spend the next couple of hours on red sandy station tracks crossing Naryilco and Epsilon Stations into the Cooper Basin gas and oil fields. The beginning of the Cooper Basin is clearly identifiable by the considerable improvement in roads which are now so obviously constructed for heavy vehicles. Turning west onto one of these gasfield roads we cross a number of large red sandhills and the exploitation of the gas and oil resources below is evidenced by pipeworks and remote controlled ‘satellite refineries for the transport and processing of oil and gas on its way into Moomba for subsequent distribution back to the East Coast or down to Adelaide. As we approach the Cooper Creek in the vicinity of Innamincka we come out onto undulating hills entirely covered with red gravel and stones. Passing the site of Australia’s first serious attempt to create geothermal energy, the beautiful hills of the St Anne’s Range appear away to our north and beyond the channel of the Cooper which is clearly defined in the middle distance by the tree line on both banks. We will arrive at Innamincka, where we are spending the next two nights, in time for lunch. Innamincka can still boast the fact that there is not a single square inch of bitumen road anywhere – it is still truly an outback settlement. This afternoon if you wish simply relax in the nice new Hotel/Motel complex and down to the Cooper at the Causeway – or take a coach trip for those who wish west along the Cooper to the place where the body of William Wills was found in 1861. Here you can read the last letter that Wills wrote to his father – the scenery of this place probably almost exactly the same as it was when he sat there to write the letter. After dinner this evening a walk up to the Innamincka Airstrip – on top of the hill less than 1km out of the village – for such a wonderful 360degrees view of the night sky.

THE COOPER

DAY 5

We will travel less than 200km this whole day. The purpose is simply to find the Cooper – there is a wonderful legend that if one crosses the Cooper three times one will never be able to leave the river behind. You will surely wonder why this magnificent watercourse bears the misnomer ‘Creek’ (it is simply an historical accident!!), or why Burke and Wills perished in country which had so much to offer for the preservation of life – indeed for life to thrive. We will have morning tea on the white sand banks of the creek near its deepest waterholes (100m) beneath huge river gums – time here just to walk and explore the creek and its gentle moods. Across the border into Queensland a short distance in the afternoon (lunch back at the hotel) to Australia’s most significant tree – ‘The Dig Tree’. We are lucky as a generation to be so close in time to the events of Burke and Wills that this tree thrives just the same today as it did when it sheltered the Burke and Wills Depot Party back in 1861. For there will come a day when future visitors simply find a monument here to mark the spot where this tree once stood. The spirit of Burke and Wills still pervades this place – the sound of them coming back up the creek - you can almost today look down the creek for their appearance around the bend. Their feelings of despair as they stood under the same tree wondering at their misfortune in missing the Depot Party by 9 hours – after a journey that had taken them more than 3 months to the Gulf away to the far north. By the time we leave this Creek tomorrow morning something may have happened and you will carry with you the spirit of the Cooper for a very long time.

INNAMINCKA TO BIRDSVILLE

DAY 6

Whilst the total distance is not much more than 500km today is a long one – following the best available route across the Strzelecki Desert up to the Birdsville/Windorah Road then west to Birdsville. This is truly remote Australia and the Cooper Basin at some of its scenic best. Not for every kilometre of the journey but rather a gradual changing scenery as we move from one geological region to another – hard stony country, ‘jump-ups’, hills that could come from the NSW Southern Highlands (though bare of large trees and red brown and orange rather than green), creek courses snaking away in the

distance and marked by the hardy beefwood, wattle, sandalwood and other low trees of this region; but always again and again the country abandoning itself to the red sand. Depending on the route we follow the only sign of white settlement we will pass today may be the abandoned Betoota Hotel. Built on the Windorah/Birdsville Road about 1881 it was for all time the only building standing on this 400km stretch of road between those two places. The hotel closed when its last owner ‘Ziggy’ Remienko retired in 1997. It is an indication of the care of people who pass through Betoota that still today the hotel stands almost exactly as it was the day Ziggy closed the door for the last time. An unusual feature of a small section of this road between Betoota and Birdsville is the levelling, widening and sealing of a long straight stretch to create a useful emergency landing strip for the likes of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. The ‘parking signs’ that we are used to on our suburban or town roads have been adapted to warn of this dual use of this bit of the carriageway! Late this afternoon we come into Birdsville past the famous Birdsville racetrack and to the equally famous Birdsville Pub for two nights.

BIRDSVILLE

Day 7

If we can find him we will take advantage of the services of Jimmy Crombie, an Aborigine with a lifetime in this part of Western Queensland, as the local guide for our coach this morning. The ‘Working Museum’ of John Menzies at Birdsville is certainly one of the best, if not the best, private museum in Australia. A visit to the museum, before morning tea at the Bakery, is organised. Then with or without our guide we travel only a few kilometres around this unique place – the tree marked by Burke and Wills, the racetrack, the Diamantina Causeway, and out to the now abandoned but original route of the Birdsville Track into this town. After lunch we will spend the afternoon travelling the 30km or so west to the edge of the Simpson Desert. Afternoon tea will be served at the base of ‘Big Red’ the first and biggest sandhill of the desert; for those with the stamina there will be adequate time to make the climb to the top for expansive views of the desert beyond.

BIRDSVILLE TO BOULIA

DAY 8

We drive north from Birdsville today – tracking the edge of the Simpson Desert some 50km away to the west – through Bedourie to Boulia. Just out of Birdsville we stop to inspect then travel through a most remarkably big stand (hundreds of acres) of Waddi trees. This is one of only three sites in the world where these trees of the desert grow. As we travel further north, right up as far as Bedourie and beyond, we are in country that becomes isolated and water logged when northern rains flood the channels of Eyre, Hamilton and other river systems; Bedourie becomes isolated for months at a time – sometimes hard to believe in the form in which we will be seeing this beautiful undulating country. After lunch in the Bedourie Hotel we travel 200km further north for a night at the Desert Sands Motel in Boulia.

BOULIA TO WINTON

DAY 9

Boulia is at the north-west corner of our visit to the Channel Country. Before we leave to travel east for Winton this morning we will visit the Boulia racetrack – surprisingly a much more substantial infrastructure (including lawns in front of the grandstand) than the Birdsville racetrack. Morning tea back in town then out onto the vast Mitchell Grass Plains that extend from here almost right across to Longreach 600km to the east. The first part of this route is the location of the locally famous ‘Min Min Light’ legends. The only building between Boulia and Winton is the little old wooden pub at Middleton – and there we stop for lunch. The only substantial interruption to the plains country is the occasional ‘jump-ups’ and at the most spectacular of these, Cawnpore Hills out of Middleton, we stop for the view and some spectacular photo opportunities. Arriving in Winton about 5pm we will be spending two nights in the substantial and relatively new Boulder Opal Motor Inn.

WINTON**DAY 10**

Charlie Phillot owns Carisbrook Station, located in a most spectacular huge valley south-west of Winton; Charlie is our guide for the whole of today. We spend the morning on Carisbrook where Charlie will take us to many of the vantage points on the red escarpments which mark one boundary of his property, with Charlie's bush camps for morning tea and lunch along the way. With a lifetime spent in this region, Charlie is a mine of information and a wonderful advocate, for this country. In our wanderings before lunch we are gradually moving further and further south of Winton – towards Lark Quarry. It is at this Quarry that a dinosaur stampede occurred 100 million years ago and it is to the site of that event that we go with Charlie after lunch. From Lark Quarry we return towards Winton along a different route, down past Charlie's home on the plains for afternoon tea. This is a long day with a very interesting man. We return to Winton for dinner about 6pm.

WINTON TO LONGREACH**DAY 11**

We travel only 200km today from Winton across to Longreach. Thus we do not have to leave Winton until we have taken time in the town centre with its wonderful Matilda Centre and perhaps out to some other spectacular country nearby and to the north of the town. After an early lunch in Winton we travel across to Longreach in time to do the late afternoon dinner cruise on the Thompson River. This is a beautiful introduction to the largest town in this part of Queensland with a good sunset it is even better. Once again we spend two nights in this place, this time in the Longreach Motor Inn which is within easy walking distance of the centre of town.

LONGREACH**DAY 12**

The whole of today is set aside to do proper justice to the attractions of Longreach. Both the Qantas Museum and the Stockman's Hall of Fame are a kilometre or so east of the town – each within a few hundred meters of the other on opposite sides of the Capricorn Highway. The coach will take us out to the Qantas Museum – then with lunch at either of the nice cafes in both places, we have the day set aside to visit both the Museum and the Hall of Fame. Starting some convenient time after lunch our coach will run a shuttle service as passengers wish to be taken back to the motel. Dinner this evening in the Longreach Club.

LONGREACH TO RAY STATION**DAY 13**

From Longreach we travel south, following generally the path of the Thompson River down the eastern edge of the Channel Country, firstly in Mitchell Grass country then in harder scrub country further south towards Stonehenge which is a short distance off our route. Stopping at Jundah for morning tea we will be Windorah for lunch – crossing the former Thompson River which, after it has joined the Barcoo River, has become the Cooper Creek a few kilometres east of Windorah. After lunch at the Western Star Hotel we drive a further 120km south-east on the Diamantina Development Road looking out for Mark Tully and the Ray Station turn-off. We arrive at Ray Station for our two night stay on this property where Mark and Sandra Tully, and maybe one or other of their children, are our hosts.

RAY STATION**DAY 14**

Mark Tully is a grandson of Patsy and Sarah Tully (nee Durack) and Ray Station has been in the Tully family for four generations. This is a wonderful family of West Queensland and their hospitality is instinctive and certainly not 'learned' from any hospitality college. Some of us will be accommodated in the shearers quarters (there are no en-suite facilities here) and others in the former

workmen's huts nearer the homestead. All of the accommodation is clean and comfortable – we take all our meals in or around the shearers kitchen. Coming out to these buildings through scrub, the country suddenly opens out to a huge, and if the season has been good, grassed plain. Our time with the Tullys begins with Mark's guided tour through the old homestead – the memorabilia that they have collected makes this almost its own small museum. Later we visit various features of the property and have lunch – usually organised by Sandra at the site of an old opal mine some distance from the homestead. Tonight we will sit around a campfire after dinner with the Tullys and Mark's guitar.

RAY STATION TO THARGOMINDAH**DAY 15**

This country is often associated, in one way or another, with the Durack and Tully families. For those who have read Patsy Durack's novel *Kings in Grass Castles* you may remember Kyabra Station. After we leave Ray Station this morning we travel down a gravel road some distance to a wonderful waterhole on Kyabra Station – and if they are around Kyabra's current owners John and Clare Steele will join us there while the billy boils. Then on to Eromanga for lunch in a pretty 'ordinary looking' small hotel – with an internal cobbled courtyard that could have been lifted straight out of a village somewhere in Italy. Up the road from the hotel is a general store – in one corner is a huge and apparently very expensive gas bottle. It was near Eromanga that Steve Fossett, the American adventurer, successfully completed his circumnavigation of the world in a hot air balloon in 2002. The people of Eromanga were some of the first to go out to the place where Steve landed and retrieve him and his belongings. The gas bottle left behind was Steve's way of saying 'Thank you'! After Eromanga we travel another 300km around to Thargomindah – passing the turn-off to the Jackson oil fields along the way. We have truly circled the Channel Country for at this turn-off we are only about 200km east of Innamincka. Tonight we are accommodated in the Oasis Motel at Thargomindah.

THARGOMINDAH TO NARROMINE**Day 16**

We turn back towards home today. Leaving Thargomindah we follow the back road down to Hungerford then on to Burke and down the Mitchell Highway to Narromine. We stop for morning tea and an inspection of a wonderful corrugated iron hotel built in the days of Cobb & Co at Hungerford. It was here that Henry Lawson composed poetry and his spirit still lingers by the bar and open fireplace. At Bourke we will have lunch in the grand old Port of Bourke Hotel. The drive from Bourke down to Narromine takes another three hours; from now on we are always on the bitumen highway so this afternoon is certainly restful on board the coach. Perhaps a little classical music will complement the passing pastoral scenery. Back in Narromine at the Peppercorn Motor Inn we will have dinner at Buxees Restaurant (opened once more by Bev and Vicki just for our tour group).

BACK TO SYDNEY**DAY 17**

A large brunch today (about midday) in the gracious setting of Duntryleague at Orange – this old homestead a grand monument to its first owner; and a fitting place to end the tour. Then back over the Blue Mountains along Bells Line of Road returning to Sydney about 6pm – with of course an afternoon tea stop (apple pie and cream with coffee or tea) at Bilpin on the way down the mountains.