

Christmas 2009 in Arkaroola

42°C in Adelaide, Wednesday December 23, 2009. Yikes! Although there was some relief that Christmas would be cooler with more 'civil' weather. The tropical cyclone, Laurence, was hitting the coast at Broome and its range could be felt in SA with sweeping cloud and rain bands causing quite a bit of temperature change across the days. It sounded like reason enough to head off and enjoy the climes elsewhere as I am used to doing at this time of year. This year's destination was Arkaroola and although I had done this trip a number of times before by car and 4WD, I can say it was not by plane in a Jabi (Jabiru LSA) – and not with a friend as pilot, nor in the front seat with all the dials and technical stuff! So the adventure started there...

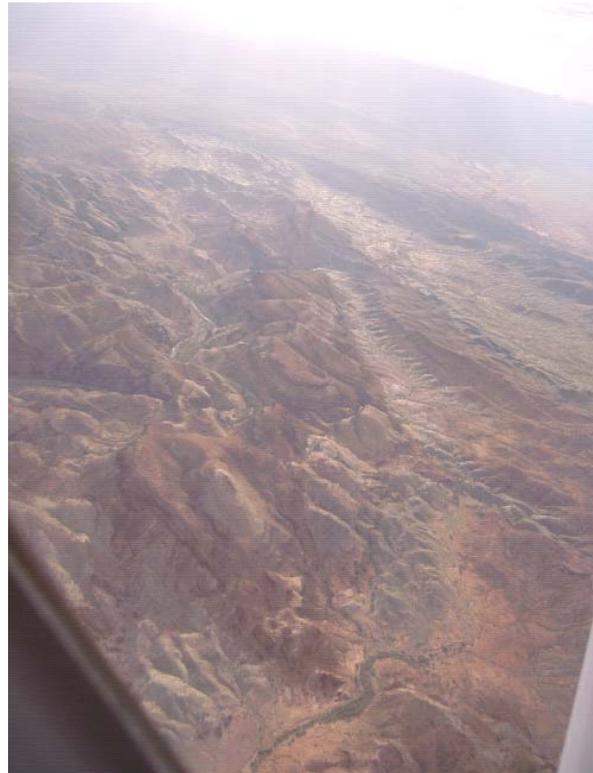
There is a great deal of planning, organising and fine tuning that goes into a flight plan as I discovered. And I asked many a question about how it all happens within reason I hope – after all, I didn't want to be annoying but I was curious to learn! – Diana was very obliging and answered all my questions and postulations about our journey.



After we had packed the plane with our kit and treats for Christmas early afternoon on the 23rd, we headed off in somewhat cooler conditions at the higher altitudes (4,500ft – 7,000ft) and I was happy to pull out maps and track our journey, plotting times on the way. The plan was to top up with fuel at Jamestown and then onto Arkaroola, arriving about an hour before last light. Having discovered our Jamestown stop would not fit with our proposed flight time, Diana turned

around to re-fuel (top-up) at YMBD (Murray Bridge) before heading straight to the Ark.

The journey was an adventure for me. To experience the land and feel almost as free as the birds in flying up there was great. It took us approx. 4 hours with a head wind most of the way and Diana handled it all in her stride. It was a stress-free flight despite the heat of the day.



The trip was delicious and the flight was so refreshing. I had known of the familiar road trip stops and signs but this journey was new to all the senses! The rise and fall of the Porcupine Range like the back of a crocodile, the shadow fall of hills and valleys hinting at the history of the land, the opening up to the desert country and man's attempt at converting the land to 'productive use' all stimulated the brain and revived the senses.

The Flinders Ranges are a treasure – we know – and it was great to be back in this beautiful country again. The sheer drops from steep climbs to spreads of land fanning out below, the narrow passages and marked gorges were a sight to behold. And then there was Lake Frome – gleaming in the distance and through the heat haze and dust devils, hinting at her existence and

Christmas 2009 in Arkaroola

challenging the travel weary to question if they were imagining things - if water could really be here, amidst the dry dusty flats and open desert...



I could feel the lure of the bush country again. I could appreciate how the stories of long ago were created. I had an inkling of how many cultures tell their many stories of serpents and gods and travellers and treachery and life and mother earth and sky and light and rain. It was all before us in that flight – all the elements of many fabulous tales. And being free of the bonds of routine allowed your mind to wander and your imagination to soar like the Jabiru to run to those places of the heart and soul that create meaning and connection in life. And as you breathed it in you saw more harsh beauty in the land – the unforgiving line of death and life. *“A land of sweeping plains, of ragged mountain ranges..... Her beauty and her terror - The wide brown land for me.”* – Dorothea McKellar was definitely on the money!



And as we landed in Arkaroola the sting of the heat was waning and the evening sky seemed to assure us of a more pleasant night

or was that the promise of the aquamarine pool as we made our way to the cabins at the Arkaroola Village?

After settling in, being made welcome and having a refreshing meal we headed off for a quiet evening walk amid clouded skies and with enough moonlight to show us the track. The silence was a hymn to the beauty of the place and the calls of wildlife the tenors and baritones of the choir all performing for us! A refreshing dip in the pool concluded our day and offered revival to the senses, allowing us time to discuss activities for Christmas Eve. We found we had the place to ourselves as no other guests were about - what a bonus – a sanctuary exclusive to us!



Christmas Eve morning, I was up relatively early and having touched base with the friendly staff at the Village found out a number of walks that held interest. I headed out on the Mawson Valley Walking Trail (an 8km round trip) after checking in on Diana and leaving her to rest up. It was an easy going walk with a number of points of interest and changing scape, especially if you are geologically oriented!



Christmas 2009 in Arkaroola

The continuous cloud cover put me at ease and I meandered on the path. I could see the build up of cloud as I progressed and before long spots of rain began to fall. It was quiet refreshing and I recalled the forecast had said it would be very light as Arkaroola was on the very outskirts of the band of expected rain. I know from experience that weather can change rapidly in these parts and it can be quite deceptive – with sun, rain and wind conditions. However, I had not travelled far and was within easy reach of the village so decided to stop at one of the rocky outcrops and just take in the country. The drops of water grew in size and intensity and I reluctantly had to turn back as I could sense this was soaking rain and it would set in for the morning at least.



I chatted with Diana upon my return to the village and as the time passed the rain grew heavier. Later we decided to get some lunch and maybe settle into a book and indoor activities as the rain continued and settled in for the day.

At the Village – the ‘Pic and Shovel’ lounge bar was the human ‘watering hole’ – and in a short while there was quite a bit of activity with folks arriving from Perth, Queensland and the remote roads for a break – and from the weather. The rain had begun to fall steadily and reports were in that some roads had become impassable. So here we were all in one place... We got to talking to some of the locals that had dropped by and found we were welcomed into their pre-Christmas celebrations that stretched to drinks and introductions, exchange of stories, a sing-along on guitar and some dance moves from

the extroverts in the group as the day grew to a close.



The Arkaroola team were really friendly, warm and hospitable – they made you feel part of the family! Christmas Eve, passed into early Christmas morning (via a card game or two) and we finally decided to retire, having really enjoyed ourselves.

Christmas Day started with a good walk up the Mawson Valley walk with the intention of getting to the Pinnacles on the circuit. We exchanged reminiscences of the day before, the flight up, past Christmases and the many stories that girlfriends do whilst straying off the path when we spied things of interest or our attention was drawn to unusual sights or in supposing of what had happened in the history of the landscape. It was thoroughly enjoyable and amid laughter and clearing skies we discovered a part of the river bed that stirred up the child in us discovering new rocks and treasures like a child discovers presents and pleasures of new glittery toys. Arkaroola is wonderland, truly!



Christmas 2009 in Arkaroola

We marvelled at the crystal formations, the polished edges, planes and the colourations and make-up of the many rocks and stones of the area. The hours flew.



Our return journey revealed an abandoned eagle nest (we presumed – it was large and consisted of branches, not twigs!), spectacular rock walls, acacia trees and wildlife.



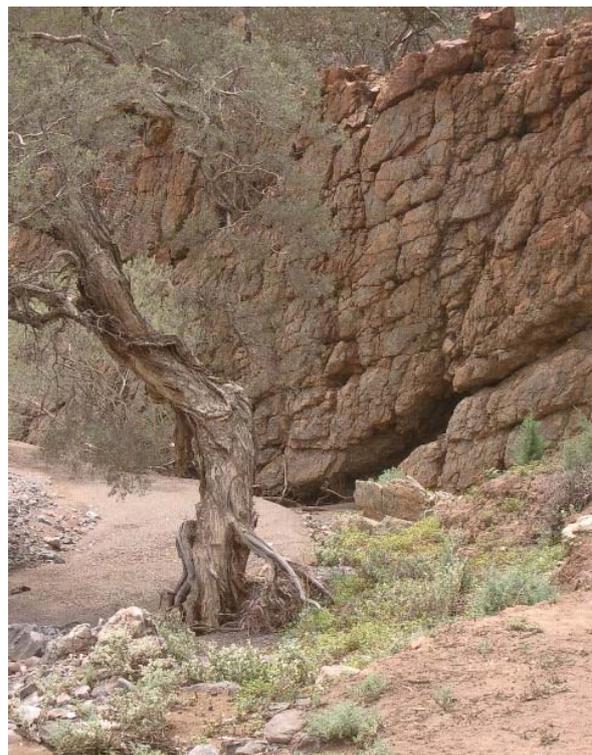
We were full from the experience and had worked up quiet an appetite so set up preparing our lunch. We indulged with a smorgasbord of seafood and turkey, cherries, cheese and pate, whilst sipping champagne and delighting in our situation, location, company and peaceful surroundings! The Christmas cake would have to wait for a pool-side relax that took in Griselda Hill and the clear skies that were now apparent.

Ahhh, the pool was a perfect place to gather and feel the stretch of a warm Christmas day Aussie style that settles into a snoozy afternoon after the food and drinks and before the cricket commences. A number of guests came and went across the afternoon and the hosts (Terri and Brendan) were seen about the place as I got absorbed into reading

and relaxing. We meandered down later to find the staff playing a friendly game of cards and relaxing and eventually made arrangements to re-fuel the plane in prep for a return flight on the next morning.



Brendan made arrangements to re-fuel the plane and it was spectacular to travel out to the airstrip close to dusk to see the Wooltana country after crossing the grid from the Arkaroola Sanctuary. The colours of the desert and the wide open plains were sensational – the hills and land draped in dusty pinks and rusty reds fading to deep violets and deeper midnight blues with the fading light. The bright light of the horizon rising to the restful deep-space blue with stars beginning to peep out in a clear summer sky as the light faded and the moon traded places with the sun to light our way.



Christmas 2009 in Arkaroola

As it was such a clear night we indulged in some star gazing and were lucky enough to see a shooting star amid the dynamic display of the heavens that night. The Observatory viewings must be spectacular at Arkaroola with such unrestricted views and I felt a return visit to participate in one would be magnificent indeed. It was a very gratifying end to an amazing few days.



We left next morning at 7am (airborne by 7.45) and were elated at our very good fortune to have had the wonderful time we did – great hospitality, fabulous setting, grand conditions and perfect weather to enjoy all the activities we wanted, delightful company, superior adventure – a great experience all round!

Our flight back was swift, thanks to a 10 knot tail wind and smooth conditions. It also provided a differing and enormous view along the return path because of the time of day and the light conditions – it was perfectly clear and you could really see forever! Along the way, Diana offered to show me what the plane could do, so she showed me how the controls responded, we did some lovely turns and surveyed the land from a whole other perspective. It was soaring like an eagle... oh the freedom and as Diana pointed out you can't fall anywhere – and then proceeded to show me with a lovely gentle glide.

It was great to see how complex the series of activities are when you fly... and to experience the 3D spatial drive! It set me thinking about the how's, what's and if's associated with the reality of flying like never before and I could feel my heart racing - it was very exciting!

I had always loved the idea of flight and the feeling of it, but never thought of being a pilot or flying a plane myself, and now I am tempted. Maybe there is a little flyer in all of us, buried deep somewhere...

We had a perfect landing that seemed to reflect the whole journey to Arkaroola. A little sad it was all over we re-fuelled and set to cleaning the plane and 'parking it away', when I had a great opportunity to go for a quick flight with Neil, one of the instructors I had just met. Now let me see... go for a flight or wash a plane.... tough choice, I know! I was treated to some turns that felt like a pivot on wingtip, a 'touch and go' landing and a chance to fly the plane at 1500-2,000ft (very game of instructor Neil, I must say). It was so much fun though and left me buzzing with excitement.



What a group! There always seems to be different people with interesting stories of journeys and experiences at YMBD and a willingness to share. The adventure never stops – I can see how the flyers get 'hooked' and passengers get thrilled. Every flying journey seems to be a 'holiday' where it is very much about the journey there and back, as well as experiencing your destination. It rocks!

Judalyn, Dec 2009

Photos: Judalyn Baldrey and Diana Jemson