

# ***Desert Experience – Life at the Disco-Hilton on the CSR 2007.***

## ***By Rob and Jenny Moore***

### **Prologue**

We left Uluru with two other vehicles on 18th July for an adventure on the Canning Stock Route. Little did we know what was ahead of us. We had read the books, prepared the vehicle, ordered a fuel drop, packed the extra fuel, water, and food that is required for such a remote 4WD adventure. The Great Central, the Heather and the Gunbarrel Highway took us to the beginning of the CSR. Each in its own way had offered us magnificent scenery, harsh road conditions and an insight into the different ways that different people relate to each other and how they travel together.

### **The Canning Stock Route**

We spent the night of 24th July at North Pool prior to embarking on the real adventure; this picturesque site was a refreshing scene with rocks, shady gum trees and water.

The journey was one of moving from one well to the next, marvelling at the skill and stamina of our early explorers and being moved by the abundance and diversity of the wildflowers and the variety of scenery between the sand dunes. It was like each valley offered us such a different vista. It was like moving between floors in a department store. 'first level, blue tinsel, second, holy grevillea, third, desert oak, forth yellow thryptomine, etc. In actual fact each valley held a multitude of flowers but one tended to predominate. Then there were the areas like the salt lakes that reminded us more of moonscapes and the burnt out valley's with skeletal trees curled around and protecting the new growth sprouting from the ground. After travelling contentedly along this route that had offered us more interpersonal challenges than physical challenges our vehicle came to a standstill mid way between sand dunes, 30 kilometres south of well 42. Our UHF alerted our travelling companions that we were in trouble. They returned, and after much looking under the bonnet, and phone calls to Landrover mechanics they towed us over the next dune.

This valley was to become our home from 5th August until 16th August we affectionately named it the "Disco Hilton", after our Landrover discovery td5, which had failed us and forced us to camp in this remote valley. Our travelling companions via the VKS network (*volunteer high frequency outback radio system - ed*) using 'Radtell' arranged a recovery of our vehicle and ourselves. This was going to be at a considerable sum of money (>\$10,000 - *ed.*) and would not be possible for at least a week. Considerable preparation was required prior to such a recovery. We were 550 kilometres south of Halls Creek, the recovery team had other commitments that needed to be completed, it would take them at least three days to get to us, they planned to depart Halls Creek on Saturday. It was Tuesday 6th and our travelling companions had their own deadlines so they then continued on their way.

We set up tent, tarps and made ourselves comfortable for what we knew would be about ten days. There were days when it was hot, very hot and we sat in the shade of the tarps, strung between car and tent, trees were small and not close enough to where our vehicle had been towed. There were days when smoke on the horizon challenged us and we put in place our own fire action plan. There were days when the wind blew and it was impossible to keep the tarps up as shade and shelter. And there were days when no cars passed our "Disco Hilton". It was days like these that life became more challenging. But there were other days when we couldn't keep up with the visitors, there were cars stopping a sand dune away because our valley was full. We so appreciate these visitors and say "Thank you" to all who stopped and shared a little of our adventure. We learnt that every visitor had their own story of life, and as they shared something of themselves it allowed us to connect with the broader community of the world. Over the ten days we had in excess of 120 visitors, We met Aussies from every

state, Germans, Austrians, English, New Zealanders all travelling the CSR because it was a choice, an adventure, an incredibly beautiful place where one sees a different vista over every sand-dune and where 'aha!' moments are frequent.

### **The value of community**

We knew we were OK, but without the passing community of the CSR we would have had no others to share with, relate to, the giving and receiving, the listening to and the sharing with others, the telling of story, the laughter and tenacity with which some attempted to fix the Discovery. These people constantly amazed us and they grounded us, they allowed us to be part of the world moving along the CSR. I even placed a bet on a horse at the Birdsville Races, I don't know if I won yet!!

What fun we had as we rushed out onto the track, visitors book in hand. Vehicles had no chance to avoid us, they had to stop. Our camp was only about 5 meters from the road, we had cleared the area of spinifex and made it as inviting as possible. Most of our visitors had some knowledge of our existence either by VKS or campground conversation. Many came with water, a precious commodity when you are stranded thirty kilometres from the nearest well and many more from one with drinkable abundant water. Well 46 became a paradise when we reached it many days later.

### **Our failed recovery**

Our rescue team (our rescue plan) greeted us on day 10 with the words, "We've had a worse trip than you". We gave them a welcome hug and made tea. The world looks differently with a cup of tea. They were tired and disappointed, this was the first time that they had failed in a recovery and their compassion for us was genuine. They told us of their story, how their truck had had three punctures and they had left it at well 46 and travelled ahead using the recovery vehicle that they had intended to leave with us. This vehicle was making a funny noise and they were not confident of their own return. They left us water, fresh bread, eggs and warmth of spirit as they headed north on their return to Well 46 and eventually Halls Creek. They left us with regret that the recovery had failed and a promise that they would try to think up another option. We heard later via VKS that they too had broken down between wells on a side road and had needed assistance from fellow CSR travellers.

### **What next!**

It was with our own sinking feeling that we faced our situation again. We were a little numb. All the planning had not protected us from breaking down and all the money for recovery could not guarantee our safety. It was time for us to re-evaluate. The day was free of visitors and the isolation very evident. The evening brought a couple that spent the night with us and eased our isolation. They listened as we processed our situation. No solutions were found but the company of others made such a difference to our spirit. We shared the now rapidly thawing contents of our freezer, and had a feast. These people told us that "Paul" via the VKS wanted to know how we were coping. We checked our visitor's book, no "Pauls"!

The next day we met Paul, he arrived along with Sharyn, Luke, Kylie, and Cherry 3yr and Julius 1yr. They had been listening to our story via VKS and were eager to be of support. Luke had expertise as a motor mechanic and he worked over the car once again. During our breakdown we had 4 mechanics offer their time and expertise and each came up with the painful conclusion that it was computer and not something that could be fixed on the side of the road. The leads to the computer had been cleaned the connections checked but the problem was only going to be fixed in a Landrover workshop that had appropriate computer expertise. We were 550 kilometres south of Halls Creek the closest Landrover mechanic was at Karatha, 1500km west of Halls Creek.

Our failed recovery, the increasing winds and our recognition that we were OK, but we couldn't stay at the Disco-Hilton between Well 41 and Well 42 indefinitely, prompted us to arrange a personal recovery via Halls Creek Police. This did not prove an easy option and

eventually we decided we would take our chances at abandoning our vehicle and hitching a lift with a passing vehicle that had a couple of spare seats. We would stay together. All of this was made possible via VKS and the generosity of passing vehicles, as our Satellite phone was very unreliable.

### **Abandoning the vehicle**

Our decision to abandon the vehicle was significant. It was worth \$30,000 plus all the modifications another \$20,000 plus the personal items it contained. Our insurance would not cover this. We removed all items of value that we had borrowed or that were easily removable, the Engel Freezer, the Waeco Fridge, Solar Panel, driving lights, winch etc. We emptied the spare fuel tanks into other vehicles. We decided what were our own personal essentials and packed clothes and toothbrushes. We removed the number plates! There was something significant about removing the plates; it freed us from this possession. This vehicle that had been our shelter, our transport, our supposed lifeline was now a liability.

Paul, Sharyn, Luke and Keily had been talking; they were not comfortable about leaving us. So in our decision to abandon our vehicle they then could offer us a seat in Luke and Keily's car by putting the children's car seat on the roof. The afternoon was rapidly flying by as we packed up our tent, swag etc and put as much as we could into the cars. A decision was made to attempt to tow our vehicle over the dune to another valley with the possibility of us returning sometime with A-frame's and a few friends with two vehicles. Dom (*from the original rescue team – ed*) had offered us the use of A frames if we could find some people willing to give us a hand. Our location on the CSR was well known and well publicized thanks to VKS but the safety of the vehicle when abandoned was unknown.

### **Timing is everything.**

Many visitors came by this day. In fact between 1 and 3pm I couldn't keep up with them. Our possessions, food, and water anything that was moveable was given away to any passing vehicle that had room or a willingness to take things. It was agreed they would use what they could and leave any valuables at the Halls Creek Police Station. We farewelled our borrowed Waeco Fridge on the top of a passing Nissan Patrol Trayback. It did look a sight!

We started off about 3pm Sharyn and Paul's Nissan towing our Discovery on a 10meter snatch strap. I travelled with Luke and Kylie and we watched as the vehicle walked over the first dune and the second. But then it stuck near the top of a very steep dune. The UHF communication was constant and vehicles for at least 10km heard our progress. It took only a few minutes before Steve and Tammy and their children Peter and Sonya offered to reverse up the dune. A double snatch over the top of the dune conducted by Luke got us over. Everyone was ecstatic, the adrenaline was pumping, and the boys with their toys were having a great time. The recovery was looking good!

### **The more the merrier.**

We were not alone; we were part of another adventure. The Waeco Fridge rescuers who were listening in to our progress suggested a good camping spot for us that first night. And it was with a lovely sense of care and connectedness that we had experienced so often during our CSR experience that we heard of Rodger and Meryl's offer to return and offer whatever assistance they could in our recovery.

This spirit of willingness to abandon pre existing plans and embrace the moment or the situation had meant that many others during our ten days at Disc-Hilton had stopped for morning teas, lunches, one, two and three overnight stays. It was this spirit of generosity and "mateship", the sharing with us of what they had; food, water, and time, made our experience a highlight.

At the beginning of the ordeal I did an inventory of food and water. We had 61.5 litres of drinking water and 14 litres of washing water. We had enough food and water for ten days or more. At the end of our time at Disco-Hilton we probably had provided meals for thirty extra people, shared our water, offered tea, real coffee, beers etc. We still had enough that on the last day we fed vegemite sandwiches on fresh bread to the hungry children and adults. And pasta with meat sauce to ten for dinner that night. It felt as if the story of the “loaves and fishes” was our reality everyday.

The generosity of people often brought tears to our eyes. The “special bottle of Margaret River Organic red wine” offered as a gift, or the six-pack of gin and tonic, or the bottle of black Douglas whiskey or the beer, the white wine. Even the lemonade icy pole and the chocolate. These were not essentials but indulgences that people offered us so freely. We had run out of alcohol when we broke down so this abundant generosity of non-essential made us smile. People’s warmth came through in numerous ways, the last car in a tag along group of twelve reached out of the window and offered two oranges as they were hurried along. People asked what we needed and I jokingly said that the maple syrup had just run out. We ate well ‘French toast with stewed dried fruit and maple syrup’ was a morning ritual. Even this luxury of maple syrup was forthcoming.

The recovery of our vehicle and ourselves became second to the journey of the remainder of the CSR (*an epic 550 kilometres at the end of a tow rope – that’s got to be some sort of record - ed*). The Wells were all visited, the walks, hikes, and washing of bodies and clothes became the norm. Roast dinners, competitions about who could bake the best loaf of bread and dingoes stealing the ‘rainbow gumboots’ featured more than our recovery. We even enjoyed a delightful swim in Stretch Lagoon and the morning delights of this wildlife haven. Overall what may have been a disaster became an adventure of a lifetime for many including us.

Thanks to VKS who were not only concerned for our physical wellbeing but our emotional state. They made us feel like people not just commodities or breakdown number x on the CSR between y and z. Mike from Perth especially followed us up with phone calls and we are grateful for this service provided by such capable and competent operators.

## **Epilogue**

We are many kilometres from the CSR, we have a vehicle that is repaired and running and we have taken a few weeks to normalize. As I write this we are staying near Ningaloo Marine Park in some Shearers Quarters as Rob paints a scene from the time on the CSR we both reflect on how this experience has changed our perspective on what we value, on our future direction and who knows we may return to this magnificent remote area of Australia in a very different capacity.

*Footnote: The Landgate survey team arrived at the Disco-Hilton on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of their adventure. Although we had the capacity we were loath to intervene in the rescue operation as the (ill-fated) recovery team from Halls Creek was already on its way. Had we known a rescue was still 7 days away we would have taken over the operation immediately. Their vehicle was well prepared for the rigors of the journey but sometimes Murphy’s Law prevails. The solar panels gave them the ability to stay on, the travelling community gave them the moral support. I remember Jenny admitting to being a crises counsellor, a handy occupation given their circumstances. – ed.*



Reproduced by permission, (jenny.moore@hotmail.com)