

# Expedition - The Plenty Lakes



**We joined a combined Direct 4WD Awareness and Central Lands Council expedition into the Northern Simpson Desert. The purpose of the trip was to look for evidence of Aboriginal occupation in the remote Plenty Lakes area.**

When Direct 4WD Awareness' Jol Fleming rang me he knew what my response would be. "We're getting together a little expedition to look for Aboriginal stuff around the Plenty Lakes," said Jol. "Wanna come along?"

I'd said 'yes', even before I knew exactly where we were going. Where Jol planned going was somewhat daunting: south east out of The Alice down the Newmery Road; onwards down the Colson Track, passing the no-go Allitra Tableland; along the Madigan Line to a dune valley beyond Camp 8; across trackless desert from there up to the lakes; several days exploration of the lake shores; more trackless desert across to the Plenty River; follow the wheel tracks across to Lake Caroline on the Hay River; then up to Lindsay Bookie's bush camp at Batton Hill, before heading north for a refuel at Jervois on the Plenty Highway. A doddle, obviously - a mere 900 kilometres of mainly off-road driving through territory that hasn't seen a black person - let alone a white person - for ages.

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"What other idiots are going?" I asked.

"A few vehicles - some Central Land Council blokes, my support team, a couple of paying customers who've done trips with me before and know what they're doing - and you lot," said Jol.

"Oh, and you'd better include Stan the video man, 'cause we'll want plenty of footage of *this* trip," Jol concluded.

So that's how we came to be parked outside Jol Fleming's Alice Springs tour headquarters at 8.30am on April 27.

The Outback Travel Australia team consisted of Keryn and me in the Discovery 3, Sheila and Tony - nurse and assistant navigator respectively - in their much-modified LandCruiser 100 Series and Robyne and Stan Gruzlewski - video shooters - in a loan Sahara 200 Series.

The Disco and the 100 had driven from the east coast and arrived unscathed, but the bog-standard Sahara had lost a short argument with a small 'roo - about five grand's worth of plastic, bracket, headlight washer and lighting damage.



Hele Crescent is normally a quiet little street in the heart of Alice Springs' industrial centre, even on a weekday.

On this Sunday morning, however, parking was at a premium. Once word travelled around the traps that Jol was heading into the unknown, desert addicts came out of the woodwork, seemingly.

Jol's 'few vehicles' had grown exponentially into a convoy of 20 4x4s – 21 if you counted NT Tourism's John Stafford, who was coming along for the first two days' travel only, because of government business commitments. The vehicle count increased still further when we noticed that some of the 4x4s were towing camper trailers – normally no-nos in dune country. One of them had tandem axles!



Jol always pulls a trailer on bush trips, because, being a tetraplegic, he needs a home away from home trailing behind, along with his electric 4x4 buggy, complete with 'nobbly' bush tyres. However, Jol has been driving in dune country since he was a kid and he knows what he's doing. We wondered how experienced the other drivers were.

"Don't worry about them," Jol reassured me. "They've all done tough trips before with me – they know exactly what they're doing."

After a meet and greet with the punters and the Aboriginal blokes we mounted up for the great adventure. Radios crackled with directions as the unwieldy vehicle train wound its way through Alice Springs and soon we were out on the Todd River Road, heading for the desert.

When we hit the gravel, Jol pulled the convoy up for a cuppa and a tyre pressure drop.

"We're all heavy with fuel, food and water, so I'll keep the speed down to 70 clicks or so," said Jol.

"Once we get onto Numery Station the road narrows down to a couple of tyre tracks, so speed won't be an issue any more."

Rain is a scarce commodity on the western edge of The Simpson and the road was very dusty, so the convoy stretched out over several kilometres. Fortunately, there were few turnoffs, so steering the long vehicle train wasn't a problem.

We've visited Numery Station in the past and it was sad to see it currently deserted, a testimony to the severe drought conditions in recent years.

We've also seen the informal 'Colson Track' sign before, but with permits being almost impossible to obtain, it's remained forbidden territory to most travellers.



On this occasion, with permits safely tucked in Jol Fleming's glove box and two Troopys full of Central Land Council blokes in our convoy we breezed past the sign and joined the legendary track. The top end of the Colson Track runs through Pmere Nyente Aboriginal land and the custodians are concerned that tourist traffic along the Colson Track could lead to violation of sacred sites on the western side of the Tableland. Hence the reluctance to issue permits.



The Colson has received some traffic in recent months, following an agreement between the CLC and Merlin Petroleum, to establish a gas production facility just off the Colson Track. Hopefully, this will lead to tourist permits being issued.

Our convoy ran along the Colson Track only as far as the intersection with the Madigan Line, not far from C T Madigan's Camp 5. The intersection was very difficult to find, because tourists driving the Madigan Line avoid the Pmere Nyente Aboriginal land and strike the Madigan at the Camp 6 claypan, following a detour that starts at Camp 2, north of Old Andado Station.

Out of respect for the sites on the Allitra Tableland we camped outside the Pmere Nyente borders, just beyond Camp 5.

The Colson's narrow wheel tracks and the ever present sharp stakes on the edges had taken their toll and there were sounds of compressors running as crews shoved plugs in tyres and pumped them up.

A stake in one of Tony's tyres resisted extraction, so we settled on packing five plugs around the splinter – they held for the rest of the off-road trip.

There was drama overnight, with one of the convoy members suffering a medical emergency in the small hours. He had to be hurried northwards, to rendezvous with a Flying Doctor aircraft at dawn, on the strip at Numery Station. The convoy was down to 20 vehicles and that reduced by one more when John Stafford parted with us before lunchtime.

Running down the Colson Track's grassland and dune valley terrain had been easy, but when we turned east on the Madigan we encountered a track that runs across Spinifex valleys and over soft-topped dunes. As our 4x4s climbed and fell over lumps that were up to a half a metre high the ride quality was 'character building'.

We soon came across evidence of the Merlin Petroleum boys at work, in the form of a wide, smooth, graded road where the Madigan's normal two tyre tracks should have been. What looked like relief from the Madigan's ceaseless Spinifex-clump bouncing action soon proved to be false, because the unmapped, graded track veered north of the Madigan and we had no way of knowing where it would take us.



The leading vehicles headed south down a dune valley and those of us towards the rear of the convoy did a quick about-face and found the Madigan once more. As it turned out, we could have enjoyed the comfort of the graded section, because it re-crossed the Madigan Line about 12km further on!

Progress across the lumpy dune valleys and soft-topped dunes was slow, as crews successively lowered tyre pressures in vehicles and trailers.

The trailers did cause some delays on the steeper dune faces, but that provided ample time for those behind to stretch their legs and check out the scenery.

As we knew from a previous trip along the Madigan Line the dunes are much steeper on their eastern faces than on the western sides, so we were heading along what was a one-way track for the trailers. There was no chance of their climbing the eastern dune faces should we have to back-track for any reason. We were committed.

The first day's run along the Madigan was slow, caused in part by the necessary crew adjustments to the conditions and by our unexpected detour. We'd made not much more than 30 kilometres when we pulled up 10 kilometres beyond Camp 6, but everyone was in good spirits when we gathered around the campfire for a chat after dinner.

Following a satellite phone conversation Sheila reported that the evacuated casualty was responding well to treatment in Alice Springs Hospital.

Next day's lumpy run was 33 percent better – 40 kilometres distance covered – and the going became a little smoother beyond Camp 7. However, the convoy halted a few times while crews plugged or replaced flat tyres.

We camped just beyond Camp 8, knowing that next day would see us swinging north from the Madigan, into trackless desert.

Our grassy campsite on the Madigan Line, just east of Camp 8, was to be the last camp we'd have on the edge of a road of any sort for the next week. From here we drove less than 20 kilometres before swinging north up a wide dune valley that our topographic maps said would lead us directly to one of the small claypans at the southern tip of Plenty Lakes.

At this point we stopped for a cuppa, while Peter climbed underneath his machine with a patching kit, to repair a slight weep in his long-range fuel tank. Once the resin and cloth bandage had done their thing we were mobile once more.

There's always a slight feeling of unease when we leave a track that leads somewhere and venture onto virgin ground. Now that we have computer screens with topographic mapping and GPS moving map positioning it's a less unsettling experience than it used to be, when we relied only on compasses, topo maps and dead reckoning, but there's still the thrill of discovery.

Helping settle the uneasy tummies was a flattish dune valley floor, replacing the bumpy Madigan and the convoy moved along at a relatively brisk 30km/h or so.

At the rear of the convoy it was easy to imagine that we were on a formed track, as the tyres ahead had blazed a track that was already as well defined as the Madigan Line.

The topographic maps on our screens made it easy to steer a course up the dune valley, heading for the Plenty Lakes without the need to climb any dunes. We emerged on the 'lake shore' just where the little GPS arrows said we would, after running through a couple of isolated claypans. Even when we know better we expect to see some water in these depressions, but it almost never occurs. The same applied to large lake in front of us: plenty of soft clay, but no surface water.

Every time we travel with Aboriginal people we're amazed by their ability to see things we don't. We all drove across the isolated claypans on the way to the larger lake, but only the Aborigines spotted a small but sensational 'find'.

Beneath one of the ancient Gidgee trees in a shallow claypan there was an old bottle.

Alan Drover, one of the CLC representatives and a local elder, picked it up and showed it to us.

At first it looked just like a bottle that someone had dropped carelessly, but the likelihood of anyone travelling this area was as remote as the scenery. Had it floated here from the north during a flash flood? Then we noticed some aluminium tags inside it. With some persuasion they fell out the bottle neck and we gaped at what they revealed.



The tags were etched with the date 5/9/64 and bore the signatures of the Sprigg family: Reg. Griselda, Douglas and Margaret. The Spriggs are bush legends: a family that travelled over much of the Simpson Desert before there were many tracks at all. Reg Sprigg was managing director of Geosurveys of Australia Pty Ltd in the 1960s, engaged in resource exploration. Reg's wife, Griselda and his children accompanied him on some of his forays into the unknown. In one of their journals the Spriggs describe their visit to the Plenty Lakes.

Reg and Griselda Sprigg started development of the Flinders Ranges resort at Arkaroola in 1968 and Douglas and Margaret still carry on the good work today.

We'd come to the Plenty Lakes looking for evidence of Aboriginal habitation and the first 'relic' we came across was 'white feller' stuff!

## The Plenty Lakes

This area has had no recent exploration that we know of, other than preliminary journeys by Jol Fleming's mate Ken Williamson and some of the CLC members. There was some geologic survey work done in the 1980s. Ken's map of his travels in the area is fascinating, because it's a composite of printouts from his computer topographics, traced with his GPS tracks.



As Ken furthers his wanderings he adds a section of printed map, so the ragged-edged sheet is growing like an out of control quilt! He hadn't journeyed up to the Lakes from the Madigan Line before, so doubtless the 'quilt' has acquired an additional panel or two by now.

After the bottle discovery we headed around the lower lake, in search of a camp that might serve as an exploration base for a couple of days and settled into a sheltered claypan, fringed by low dunes and aged Gidgee trees.

Next day the convoy broke up into several exploration parties – a benefit of having a large number of vehicles – and headed off to investigate different lake shores and back dunes.

Our comprehensive map coverage of the Plenty lakes area showed dune ridges that would have to be crossed to travel from one lake to another, but the maps don't show the dune gradients. Some of the dunes were too high, too soft and too steep to be climbed, meaning longish detours at times.

Searching involved running the shore lines at low speed, looking for typical Aboriginal campsite signs: stone tools, grind stones, fireplaces and middens. Where the shoreline deepened into Gidgee forest we headed inland, looking for the same evidence.

We kept our eyes peeled for bird life – certain indication of water or soaks, but there was very little. A couple of finches and willy wagtails gathered at



our campsite in the early evening and we found a few pee wees patrolling the dry lake edges. We saw several wedge-tail nests in low trees, but they were all empty.

The only large tracks we found in this area were camel footprints and most of them looked far from recent. We came across several dried-up soaks that bore the marks of camels scraping with their feet at the sand, in search of water, but of the camels themselves, not a sighting.

The most recent recorded rainfall in the area was six months prior to our visit, so perhaps the camels had left the area in pursuit of wetter pastures.

The day's search along several dry lake beds produced nothing of Aboriginal significance, so we broke camp next morning and headed for the more northerly lakes.

Here we had more luck. The next day we were heading along the shoreline of a smallish dry lake and we noticed some box trees on the opposite shore. In a dry landscape that encouraged only saltbush, low scrub and Gidgee growth the eucalypts stood out clearly. We followed the shoreline around to the box trees and noted that there was evidence of water pooling along the shore, with clearly visible 'tide' marks showing previous water levels. This looked a much more likely Aboriginal campsite than anything we'd seen in the area.

As we walked along the shore the evidence was easily spotted: several quartz cutting stones and small grind stones lay on the sand, dropped where their users had finished with them.

We looked for fireplace residue that could be carbon-dated, but we couldn't find any.

The last of the Plenty Lakes finds came next day: a rock cairn hiding a glass jar with 1980s survey details inside; and a yellow bloodwood tree among the Gidgees, complete with blaze that was most likely done by the same survey party.

From the northernmost lakes our course led towards a bush camp on the Plenty River. Once again we were doing the 'bounce, bump' dance across Spinifex valleys and climbing sand dunes. However, we broke the drudgery by heading off in separate parties to explore the remaining small lakes and claypans in the north-east sector of the Plenty Lakes area.

One of these had been recorded from the air as a possible ceremonial site, exhibiting what looked like stone arrangements in its centre, but when we drove to its rim and clambered down to the clay surface we found that the different coloured rings were caused by water tannins staining the claypan.

The only signs of life and death on its surface were recent bloodstains and the remains of a lizard that had fallen prey to a snake. Trails in the soft clay mapped out the struggle. In another spot tracks showed where, after rain, a lizard had scampered out onto the wet clay to snare a victim and returned to the safety of the shore.

Most of the claypans in the north-western section of the Plenty Lakes and several of the pans we came across en route to the Plenty River had ample evidence of Aboriginal visitation. It wasn't hard to find cutting tools, the odd spear point and small grinding stones of the type often carried by wandering tribes – large stones being too heavy to transport very far.

The CLC people seemed pleased with the evidence the teams unearthed, but none of it suggested long-term occupation of the area.

The last leg across the Northern Simpson to the Plenty River traversed steadily improving country, with increasing stands of mulga and box, amid greener scrub and Spinifex. The Plenty was as dry as a dead dingo's donger, but tall trees along the banks showed that the waters do flow at times.

## The Trailer Gang

We've long held the opinion that trailers have no place in dune country, but after this half-Madigan and cross-country expedition we've modified our views somewhat.



We've been in dune country before with Jol, who pulls a trailer behind his Ford F150. With vehicle and trailer tyre pressures way down and bead locks, Jol doesn't find much that stops him.

The other trailer-haulers on this trip were just as capable. Sure, they needed several attempts at some of the steeper, softer dunes, but so did a couple of the solo vehicles.

Our fears for Ed and Janice, who pulled a hefty two-tonne, two-axle, custom-built camper trailer behind their Patrol, were unfounded. With all eight tyres bagged out this long combination did an excellent job of conquering the dunes.

John and Suzette have done thousands of bush kilometres in their LandCruiser 80 Series, hauling an Ultimate camper behind. Fatties all 'round, plenty of grunt and good driving technique meant they were rarely stuck. The same went for Wal and Jan in their 100 Series, pulling a T-Van camper.



## Jol Fleming's Support Team

When Jol Fleming was involved in a vehicle accident in 1981 that confined him to a wheelchair his life changed completely. After a year's rehabilitation in Adelaide he returned to the beloved Red Centre where he was born and raised, and became involved in researching the Aboriginal and white settlement history of the region. That involvement soon had Jol leading informative tours around the Red Centre.

Having been brought up with Aboriginal kids as mates and with a background of driving tour coaches, Jol saw the benefits to the Aboriginal community of eco-tourism. He determined to encourage the traditional owners of Aboriginal land to open up parts of their territory for controlled tourism.

Jol's first success was in conjunction with Lindsay Bookie, custodian of some of the Northern Simpson Desert Aboriginal lands. Lindsay Bookie now runs a well equipped bush camp at Batton Hill on the Hay River and Jol runs tours through this country.

Other traditional land owners are now talking with Jol Fleming.

Jol's bush mobility is due in no small part to his support team – the people who are his virtual legs. On this trip Jol had the care and support of Rosie, Lee, Cheryl, Christine, David and Jim. Sandy, from Australian Geographic Magazine, put her hand up to help with the cooking.



Rosie checks tyre pressures



Lee (left) and Sandi (right)

The support team sets up camp each day, helps Jol out of his vehicle into his motorised 'beast', does all the necessary camp duties and then packs up the next day.

And they have a ball!



Allan (left) and Jim (right) refuel

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