

The

Student's Desk

ON LOCATION

Hello from Adelaide,

After a month on the road, my skin has gone through about 10 shades of brown, and I'm now resting up a friend's place – and boy do I need a rest.

In the past 2 weeks, I've had plenty of triumphs as well as trials. While it's been an experience I do not wish to have again any time soon, it's one I'm glad to have.



In this edition of *The Student's Desk on Location*, We begin in the West MacDonall Ranges. Simpsons Gap was well worth visiting. It was an easy walk in, and you got to appreciate the magnitude of the formation. There are several gaps near Alice Springs, but Simpsons gap is by far the most spectacular.

Stanley Chasm was something else again. It came highly recommended by one of my supporters, so I ventured thus.

It cost \$6 to get in there and was told it was a 15-20min walk one way. It was a hot day, so I decided to ride my bike rather than walk. As I was getting the bike out, I lost my balance, fell on my backside, and the bike ended up on top of me. My buttocks still hasn't recovered! I rolled the bike off me, picked myself up, and with a few grazes, got ready to ride.

I got 5 minutes up the track when it became obvious the bike wasn't going to get through, but I decided it was walkable. So it was back



to the Hotel Royal, put the bike back in, got changed, again. Got the backpack ready and set off on foot. Well, it was an easy walk until two thirds into it when it became a boulder hope. I managed the first part, and asked an American walking back if it got much more difficult. He said no, and assured me if I got this far, I could go all the way. He was half right. It did get more difficult as the picture on the left shows.

Don't look for the walking track – that is the walking track. Remarkably I only fell one, and that was just my foot slipping while scrambling with all fours through a couple of boulders. The bigger problems were camera batteries going flat while the other set was, you guessed it, back in the Royal, and running out of water. Oh, and that 15-20min walk? Make that 1hr – each way! I was really confused as to what my \$6 went towards. It seemed to me I spent money on the entry fee for the privilege of spending more money at the Kiosk. I guess that makes sense to some people.

I got back to the Hotel Royal to have a well earned lunch feeling rather proud of what I had just done. My mind was screaming “BRING IT ON!!!” while my body replied “But not tomorrow...” The person from whom the recommendation came has since received a verbal kick up the backside, and can look forward to the real thing on my return. Next time they want to relive their teenage years, they can do it themselves!

I camped that night at Ellery Creek. On the way, I discovered that I had broken my 12v cable for the AA battery charger, I had picked up the wrong milk, and I was running out of Butane Gas. I also pulled the Hotel Royal apart looking for my CDMA phone that night to no avail. I only managed to retrieve it 3 days ago – 2 weeks after it had gone missing! I didn't like the idea of being at Uluru with nothing to power my camera. So I returned to Alice Springs to rectify these little frustrations, and make a second assault on the West MacDonall Ranges.



I camped that night at Ormiston Gorge and noticed there was a lookout nearby. I spoke to the ranger about the walk up. He said I'd have no trouble except there were many steps. He encouraged me to have a look for myself and make up my own mind. Somehow between that conversation and the next morning, it had got into my mind that I was going to that lookout. I packed my bag the night before, this time with 2 litres of water, dried fruit, my camera (with spare batteries) and my tripod. Expecting a hot day, I set off at the crack of dawn. I



thought about turning back a few times, especially when the track was at most half a metre wide in places with a steep drop to one side, and a wind doing its best to blow me off. But I was going to that lookout, and pressed on. Well, I was glad I did, because here was the best view of a gorge without leaving the ground. Getting up the steps was one thing. Getting back down was something else. I dare not count how many steps there were, but hopefully the pictures on the right will give you some idea of what the track was like. I returned to camp just before 9 for breakfast. No sooner had I finished breakfast, the backpack was slipped back on for a much easier, and much hotter, walk along the bottom of the gorge.



The challenges weren't only confined to walking. They also extended to driving. I followed the Mereenie Loop Rd which is along the way of 200km of dirt. Never have I driven such an appalling road. I never had imagined corrugations could be so bad! My spare agreed and decided to bail out. I heard a great noise and I stopped to find my spare lying in the middle of the road looking rather neglected. After 10mins in 30deg heat struggling to put the tyre back underneath, I flagged down some people who put it back for me, and made sure it stayed there! At times, I was driving on the left extremity of the road to avoid the corrugations, or driving at 20km/h over the top of them. 9hrs after leaving Rainbow Gorge, I pulled into Kings Canyon resort. Now I'm not sure who's worse – a white fella who charges people \$10 to drive for a 2km tunnel, or a black fella who charges \$2.20 for 200km of corrugations. Verdict pending.



And I didn't learn the first time. The same person who recommended Stanley Chasm also recommended Kings Canyon. To start with it was a beautiful concrete path, then it became a narrow earth path, then a cemented rock path, but ok. Then two thirds into it, yep, another boulder hop. I asked a tour guide operated if it got any tougher. "No!" he says, "This is as worse

as it gets, you'll get there." It got worse. At the end of it were uneven rock steps leading up to a viewing platform with, again, nothing to hang on to. I got there, and the same tour operator offered to take my photo.

From here, it was across to Uluru arriving just in time for sunset. Two nights later I would return to do my much anticipated time laps photography of Uluru when disaster struck. There I was. Camera on the tripod, laptop on my camp table, battery (making sure it was fully charged) sitting underneath. I went to open the required software, and it wasn't there. 5,000km across the blinking desert, and my most sought after event was beyond my means! Maybe I can swipe what I was going to do off the internet. In any case, it was a blessing in disguise. Just as I got all my gear back in the Hotel Royal, a real humdinger of a storm hit. Everyone at the Rock that night was cursing the storm for spoiling the sunset. Me? I was praising God. It had been a very hot day – 36degC – and I was suffering. Not that it did much to cool things down, but I knew the storm would create some unique pictures of Uluru. This is the best one I managed pictured right.



the picture on the right will give you some ideas of the track. It was a slight frustration on my way back out seeing people pass me that I had seen on their way in.



After lunch, things started to really hot up, and after 2.6km of hard walking, I really had enough. But this was my last day in Uluru-Kata National Park, so it was now or never. So the backpack went back on for another 1.1km hike up to the lookout (pictured left) along the same kind of ground I had walked on all morning. Well, I thought 4.8km for a day's bushwalking was a pretty good effort until the following week when I bushwalked 6.2km in half a day. But more of that in a while. For now, it was a rush back to Uluru to see the Cultural Centre and ride the base of Uluru on the walking track before dark. Well, it didn't help when I parked in the wrong spot so I had to ride half way around the rock on the bitumen before I found my way onto the walking track. Unfortunately it fell dark before I could complete the circuit. Still, I managed to squeeze another 8.4km out of some very tired legs, and what I thought was an unfit body. Well, it was by the next day. In the space of 1 week, I had completed 6 bushwalks on my own, without assistance, under some fairly trying conditions – mainly hot, dry days. I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself.



When I reached the viewing platform at the end of the walk, I'd sit down and have a well earned rest, drink and feed. During these times, a tour group would come through, and I'd get to hear the spiel for nothing. I'd simply sit quietly and take it all in. On one such occasion at the Olgas, it was too much for me to hold my tongue. An Aboriginal tour guide was explaining that people should souvenir rocks, because the rocks have a spirit each, and if they're taken from where they belong, it will bring bad karma. I went up to him and explained how I've got dust and dirt all over my car, and when I go home, I'll be taking it with me. Initially he tried shrugging me off saying I'll be right. I persisted in showing him the inconsistency of his statement by asking why do rocks have spirits and not dirt? He took my

point and didn't have an answer. I'm not sure if this is an Aboriginal belief, or just National Parks propaganda to discourage people from souveniring rocks. At the Cultural Centre, there's a pile of rocks that people have allegedly sent back with a sorry note. I suspect its nothing but propaganda.

The Cultural Centre was very interesting. One thing that has frustrated me with Aboriginal Culture is the secrecy. Here I am, a white fella, availing myself to understand Aboriginal culture and law, and meeting a great wall of secrecy. The closest I can get is these dreamtime stories of mythological creative beings. And what was really strange is the tour guide I spoke to at the Olgas, though he was Aboriginal, he was restricted in what he could tell his customers not because he didn't know, he did know, but he wasn't from that area. It wasn't his country. Therefore, it wasn't his story to tell. I thought this was stupid. Do this people want others to understand their culture or not? But I began to understand why this is so when I visited the Cultural Centre. Again, it's integrally linked to their identity.

I remember as a kid getting most upset when one of my parents told one of my stories – something I had done recently. It was part of who I was, and I wanted to tell the story. Even now, I get annoyed when someone else tells the story behind my car, or my bike, or some other prized possession I identify with. Others can give a brief overview, but I want to tell the whole story. It's my story to tell, and I want others to share in my pride by listening to my story told by me. I guess this is the same for Aboriginals who identify with the land, and because it's so precious to them as an identity, they are selective in who they tell. In this, dreamtime stories act as a kind of parable. To outsiders, their silly little stories of mythological beasts. To the insider, they contain their laws, their ways, their identity. Therefore, as a white fella, I will never fully understand their culture.

As a digression, I tried comparing this aspect to other cultures. Unfortunately, I'm only familiar with one – ancient Israel. In this instance, it's the complete opposite. Israel was encouraged to tell people the contents of the law. Repeatedly, they were told to remember the Lord and what he had done for them in delivering them from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:18; 8:2; 8:18; 9:7; 11:2; 15:15; 24:9, 18). They were to tell the Law to their kids, and be continually talking about it (Deuteronomy 4:10; 6:7; 11:19). They were even to bind the law on their hands and foreheads, and write it on doorposts and gates (Deuteronomy 6:8-9; 11:20). There was nothing secret about the Mosaic law. Hence it is with complete horror that the reader should find in the opening chapters of Judges that a whole generation had grown up not knowing the Lord or what he had done for them (Judges 2:10). And again, when Hilkiah the high priest found the Book of the Law in the Temple after it had been forgotten, King Josiah ordered the people to assemble and listen to the Book of the Law being read out (2 Kings 22:8; 23:2). The Law was to be known!

I wondered what the reason was for this huge contrast. The best reason I could come up with was the Mosaic Law wasn't about Israel. It never was, it never will be. The Mosaic Law was about God. It was about how a holy God relates to and redeems sinful people. It was about God making his intentions known for humanity, that they may reflect his very nature. Little wonder anyone who was anybody was to know the law.

I also wondered if Aboriginals believed these mythological creative beings who could transform between an animal and human being at will actually existed. Then I thought it was an invalid question. The main concern here is identity, not truth. I think there is a comparison here between the Aboriginal culture and ancient Israel. As said, the Mosaic Law was about God, but this is where Israel got it wrong. Israel had invested their national identity in the temple and the Law (Jeremiah 7:4; 8:8). The fact that God was a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin, yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished, and he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation seemed to be beside the point (Exodus 34:6-7). The idea of them reflecting the very nature of God by exercising justice and worshipping God exclusively was lost on them. This was Jeremiah's complaint

(Jeremiah 4:2). What was important was they had the temple. I wondered if it was similar for Aboriginals. I then began to appreciate their dreamtime.

Meanwhile, back at the Hotel Royal, I left Uluru to travel drive Oodnadatta track. I wanted to write an email before I left, but my 12v power supply for the laptop failed. When I arrived in Adelaide, I found out it was the fuse in the power supply. It was easy to fix and is now working again. But I think my auxiliary battery is in the way out. It wouldn't power my laptop through the 240v inverter. I resorted to running the laptop off the main car battery.

As big as the outback is, I soon discovered socially, it's a very small place. When I was camped at Uluru, a man cooking dinner for his family on the BBQ next to my site struck up a conversation with me. 2 days later I saw him again at Erldunda and spoke with him again. I thought with a young family, he's not going to get past Marla that day. As a matter of fact, I didn't think I would. So when I pulled into Marla, he was there to greet me. After dinner, I spent the evening talking with him and his family in their caravan. Socially it's been a very successful trip striking conversations with people at Ranges View Rest Area, Devil's Marbles, another road side rest area north of Alice Springs, Ormiston Gorge, Redbank Gorge, and Kings Canyon. Normally I wait for people to approach me, but on most of these occasions, I have approached people and found them most receptive.

The Oodnadatta Track was not what I expected. It did nothing for my confidence when there was a sign advising I should have 2 spare tyres. As it was, the spare I had was near useless. But more of that in a while. I managed to reach Oodnadatta, and in the 202km from Marla, I had only seen one other vehicle, and this was 10km out from Oodnadatta. This vehicle soon returned to Oodnadatta. I was glad to have reached Oodnadatta as the museum in the old train station is well worth a visit. While Oodnadatta has forgotten its purpose, it hasn't forgotten its past. In its day, Oodnadatta was where the Ghan train and camel trains met to transfer goods further north, and was a buzzing centre.

I left Oodnadatta for Williams Creek. There was absolutely nothing out there. The rocks on the road seemed to get bigger, and the day was getting hotter. I kept thinking if something went wrong and I needed help, it would eventually come, but it could be a long, hot wait. The desert finally psyched me out, and I turned back for the safety of bitumen and Cooper Pedy. Mind you, the road between Oodnadatta and Cooper Pedy wasn't much better. The only thing keeping me sane was the knowledge there was bitumen at then end of this road, though it be 200km away! The picture on the right shows how stark the landscape was. In another way, I was glad to drive this stretch of road. At the turn of the 20th century, men struck with *Opal Fever* would push their wheelbarrows packed with mining tools and personal belongings over the same land to Cooper Pedy from Oodnadatta after alighting the Ghan. Remember, they didn't have pneumatic tyres, or nice plastic handles to hang on to in those days. All I can say is their cases of *Opal Fever* must have been really bad!!!



I arrived in the safety of Cooper Pedy. Stressed, dinner out seemed to be a good option. Sitting in the pizza bar, I was reminded how small the outback was. A couple of retirement age walked in and exclaimed "We saw you at Kings Canyon!" So I spent some time talking with them. By the way, it was the best pizza I've had! Nothing like the oil-soaked flavoured cardboard we're accustomed to from pizza retail chains.

The following day I went on an underground mine tour and thoroughly enjoyed it. It was a worthwhile experience. While on the tour, the family I had spent the evening with at Marla turned up. As I've been saying, the outback is a small place.

That night, I camped at Pilba Pub which cost nothing. I thought that was fantastic – more money for dinner at the pub! The next day I visited Woomera heritage museum which left me rather disturbed and confused. The reason why Woomera was established was basically

because Hitler bombed the daylight out of London with V1 and V2 rockets launched from the European mainland (Norway, I think). In response, the development of rockets and missiles was put on the political agenda, and Woomera was established to develop this technology for Australia, Britain and America. The lengths to which we will go to kill each other are truly disturbing. Much more disturbing is how we glorify our ability to do so. Yet, I was confused as I was keenly aware that it's due to this technology, and the desire to kill each other, that I have a GPS sitting on the Hotel Royal's dashboard giving my precise location, the internet, and instant global communications. It's such a shame that these luxuries could not have come by peaceful means.



After a long drive, I arrived at the Flinders Ranges via Port Augusta. I really didn't know what I was expecting. I guess I was expecting lush, green mountains. Instead, it was just like Central Australia, only vertical! After a month, I was sick of seeing desert. Never had I been so desperate to see a rainforest. The same person who recommended Stanley Chasm and Kings Canyon also recommended Wilpena Pound. Now, I was foolish to have listen to this person a second time, but I must be completely stupid to listen to them

for a third time! But I must admit, on this occasion it wasn't all their fault. Being late, I headed for Wilpena Pound where I had to pay park entry fee, and a camp fee for what was more your usual tourist park circus – only worse! While at the visitors office, I enquired about the walk into the Pound and I was told it was 2km up a dirt road and I had to leave the car at the campground. Alternatively, I could catch a shuttle bus for \$4. Well, I was already aggravated from paying commercial rates for what, in my opinion, should be freely available to the public, or at the most a nominal fee. I mean, just what is the purpose of having National Parks? Why not just hand the land over to private enterprise who are going to charge about the same anyway? So I wasn't about to pay \$4 to sit on a bus for 2km just because someone in a uniform tells me I can't take my car up there. Oh, and bicycles were a no no too. Unfortunately, I wasn't thinking all that clearly to realise that 2km is actually 4km return. Had I thought of that, perhaps I wouldn't have been so dogmatic. I was also told there were a few steps which I may not have been able to handle. So again, I wasn't going to pay \$4 for a bushwalk I couldn't do. With backpack thoroughly equipped, I set off on the dirt road - on foot!

I got to the end up the road, there were two tracks to Wilpena Pound. The Top Track was a vehicular track with Wilpena Pound 1km away, and Slippery Rock Track which was a foot track with Wilpena Pound 1.1km away. Well, I liked the idea of saving 100m, and with those dreaded steps in mind, a vehicle track just might avoid them. I thought I was doing well, until 900m down the track there was a tall embankment. "Now where?" I thought. Then I saw the rock steps leading down to the creek. After some naughty words, I thought about going back and trying the foot track. But after studying the steps, I thought they were worth a crack. After all I had done, what was a rocky, uneven flight of steps?

I got down slowly, but safely and made my way easily to the cottage (picture right). I thought, "3km for that? I walked 3km to see a house? I know what houses look like. I live in a house myself! (most of the time.)" I saw a sign directing to a lookout 500m away. I thought about going up, but by then I was thinking a bit more clearly and thought, "500m up is 500m back. That's 1km, which means by the time I got back to the Hotel Royal, that would be 7km. I'm sure I don't have 7km in my legs." So I declined the opportunity. It was found to be a wise decision.



While at the cottage, I learned that the Slippery Rock Track (the foot track) was the original road into the pound. So I thought there can't be too many steps going that way. I was wrong. It turned out to be a more challenging walk. So when I finally returned to the Hotel Royal, I had covered 6.2km on foot in half a day. Ouch! My legs didn't have much more in

them! Disappointed I hadn't been to the lookout, I thought about coming back in a few days – when I had recovered, and go up to the lookout catching the bus this time. But events would take a different course.

Two days later, I was up the north end of the park about to explore the Aroona Valley. A shallow creek crossing (yes, this creek actually had water in it!) marks the entry of the valley. I got it wrong and a rock was sent through the wall of the left front tyre, despite them being proper off road tyres. The tyre was destroyed. Fortunately there was a *Camp Host*, or as I call them, *Volunteer Ranger*, camped by the crossing. He knew something went wrong before I did, and began to make his way over. He began to change the tyre when I noticed the rim on my spare was different. I hoped it wouldn't be a problem. It was. The wheel nuts wouldn't fit properly, and Don, the volunteer, didn't like the idea of me driving off with the wheel like that. So, there was only one thing to do – throw the tyre into Don's truck and drive to Hawker, 100km away, to get another tyre. But here was my other worry. My tyres are imported from Ohio, USA which none of the major tyre retailers stock. Would I be able to get a compatible tyre? Amazingly, the guy at Hawker had the exact same tyre! I was in business! 6 hours later, I was back on the road. Those wheel nuts, though ill fitting, were enough to get me out of trouble, so I continued on my way exploring the Aroona Valley and Brachina Gorge before making camp that night. Brachina Gorge was interesting as it's a proper gorge, and for the most part, the road follows the dry creek bed. I have since purchased some wheel nuts for the steel wheel, and am now having another mag wheel hunted up.

I could've stuck with my plan of *Wilpena Revisited*, but the weather really cranked up the furnace and the wind. Besides, I still hadn't recovered from my efforts 3 days previous. Instead, I drove the sections I hadn't seen including Bunyerroo Gorge. Driving into Hawker, I'd say the wind was nearing gale force, and there was a dust storm just to add to the effect. When I arrived back in Port Augusta, it was 39degC. All I wanted to do was stay in my nice air conditioned van and drive. So I rang Tammy, a Delica Club member who told me I had to stay at her place, to let her know I was on the way. So I drove the 300km from Port Augusta in 1 afternoon.

When I arrived at Tammy's, I was made to feel at home very quickly by her and her husband, Matthew. I was shown the guest room and was told, "There's a power point for you're laptop. There's the network cable for the internet. We have a 1.5Mb bandwidth with a 20GB allowance. We hardly use any of it. Go for it!" So I've gone nuts updating software, catching up with emails, writing larger than normal emails (as is evident), listening to internet radio, uploading photos, and anything else I haven't been able to do for the past month. I've been thrown down the challenge to use the 20GB, and I'm doing my best to get there!

Tammy's been spoiling me rotten with her cooking and cleaning. Matthew's been fixing all my equipment I've managed to break in the past month. Their 3 kids – Conner (4), Ashton (3) and Maximus (1) have been great, though a bit riotous as kids are. Tammy was a bit worried about how they'd respond to me. I turn up in my wild state – hair everywhere, beard well overdue for a trim – and it just hasn't been a problem. Max just thinks I'm part of the furniture. Although, he hasn't tried throwing me – yet!

So far in Adelaide, I've been to the National Automotive Museum, which is a must for anyone with petrol (or diesel) on the brain and motor oil in the blood veins. It was just too much to take in at once. We've had a Delica Club meet where one other family turned up. At least this meet actually happened. I've done a 34km bike ride following the bike paths to the hills, and visited a number of lookouts around Adelaide. Now I'm trying to recover so I can do another ride into Adelaide.



I expect to be in Adelaide a couple more days before moving off for Victoria following the coast. I'm looking forward to tackling that leg afresh.

JASON