

On the Trail of Burke and Wills

ANDREW McINTYRE

FOR anyone who hasn't been to the outback in the last few years, there are a few surprises. The idea of isolated and remote regions, with inaccessible towns joined by four-wheel-drive horror roads, rough pubs serving mutton and boiled potatoes, nasty bore water and quaint backward ways, is truly a thing of the past.

This winter, your intrepid writer went on a trip following the trail of Burke and Wills (which, now I discovered, is *de rigueur*); Cooper Creek, Birdsville, Boulia, over the Selwyn Range to their most northerly camp, number CXIX, near Normanton in the savanna gulf country. What started as an adventure of discovery—GPS, CB radio, 4X4, rugged tyres, extra water, food, etc.—turned out to be something more like a Disneyfied theme-park holiday. Well almost.

Don't get the wrong idea. Australia really still has the space, the uncluttered boldness of landscape, and we should be grateful that, as citizens, we own it all. The 'grey nomads', who invade the tropical 'top end' in winter for months on end in their mobile homes, think it's bloody paradise. So what has changed?

Well, technology has changed almost everything. For a start, most of the roads are excellent. Remember the Birdsville Track? Nowadays, it is a highway plied by luxury coaches full of oldies ('terrorists') that stop at the famous Birdsville pub for a toilet break. Forget the 4X4. Any delicate, inner-suburban European car would do the trick. Forget the food. Every outback town has a well-stocked supermarket with smoked salmon, humus, Asian spices and fresh bread. Forget the water. Water in every tap from Broken Hill to Karumba is as clear and as good as the Melbourne drop. Petrol, and excellent, trained

mechanics are everywhere. Every service is as predictable and reliable as in any outer suburb of Sydney or Melbourne.

And the outback pubs. They have become theme-park pubs of the outback, with walls lined with memorabilia of another age, post-modern corrugated iron (city architects have left their mark), with trendy chalkboard menus and fun bumper stickers ('The only wilderness is between a greenie's ears', etc.), with 'museum' rooms full of what 20 years ago would have been considered your grandfather's farming junk.

Even the ordinary non-theme pubs have changed. With prosperity come

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the obligatory aluminium window frames (usually *faux-tudor*), the new beer-resistant pile carpet, the outside façade completely covered with Four X signs, and painted vulgar colours (Normanton is famous for its purple pub, listed in every tourist guide), the inside plastered with wall-to-wall TV monitors beaming in up-to-the-minute horse and dog races from around the country. Isolated? Hardly.

Makes you wonder about the rum-pus with Telstra. I don't think I have ever seen so many Telstra phone booths in my life; in every single town,

and, it seemed, on every single corner. In the remotest, most unlikely places, the familiar phone booth, with micro-wave link and solar power, a fully automatic and autonomous phone, complete with instant dial tone, infallibly works as reliably and as clearly as my own phone in the city. And, when you phone home, looking directly out on gibba desert, that's bloody impressive.

I then noticed the radio masts sticking up everywhere in the empty landscape. They deliver untimed local calls to every homestead around.

I even discovered that you can run teleconferences from Birdsville, and that they are giving away the hardware for high-speed Internet services in remote areas for free. And the cockies there get the service at a cut rate. Having a look at some of the house prices up around Barky (Barcardine) and Longy (Longreach), I realized that they certainly don't pay the same for their real estate.

I haven't even got onto the beaut' cars they drive out there, let alone air-conditioning, refrigeration and air transport. On entering a pub in the outback town of Tibooburra, I took surprise at the menu which announced 'Fresh Oysters'. I exclaimed rather too loudly, 'fresh oysters?!' The immovable publican's wife, with hands firmly planted on her hips glared at me and bluntly added, 'What do you bloody think they are, stewed socks?'. Let me tell you, the outback has changed. Whatever hardships are endured there, they are certainly more existential than material.

Burke and Wills would have died for Telstra Home Link when they needed it.

Andrew McIntyre is Public Relations Manager at the Institute of Public Affairs.

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