

HELL IS THE GUNBARREL HIGHWAY

1000 MILES ACROSS THE AUSSIE OUTBACK

BY JIM STILES

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is more than my obligatory 4WD adventure story. It's not just my attempt to connect with the 4WD Culture, or to pull in a few extra readers during the exulted Jeep Safari Week. It is, in fact, an effort to show all of you 4WD adventure wannabes what REAL adventure is like. As you drive your \$50,000 extravaganzas up and down pre-appointed rock ledges and cliffs, with dozens of bystanders to watch and assist, and with medical facilities just a cell phone call away, I laugh...yes LAUGH at the notion that you are participating in an adventure. You have got to be kidding. It takes a lot more stupidity than that...JS

Reggie Gubbins and I were into the second month of our cross-continental Australia journey and frankly, we'd had a gutful of each other. He'd picked me up at the Sydney airport on New Year's Day in his "1981 Toyota Diesel 4WD Dual cab Ute with a canopy," and within an hour we were on the road, albeit the left side, going south along the coast. We'd been camping ever since. I had spent all of that driving time on the left side, the passenger side of the ute. From the start Reggie was reluctant to allow me behind the wheel. He was very protective of the vehicle and even scolded me once for putting a wool sock on the hood. "Would you please move that?" he exclaimed in his distinctive high-pitched Welsh accent, "You might scratch the surface!" He really loved that ute and could not bear to even get it dirty.

As for my driving, Reggie feared I might hit a kangaroo and had given me some rudimentary instructions for avoiding collisions with our pouched friends. Primarily he insisted that we never drive more than 80 km/hour (about 48 mph). I reminded him that since he'd once run my ex-wife's Pinto off a cliff at Arches National Park while in a drunken stupor and totaled it, I was very well within my rights to hit a kangaroo, just for spite. (Of course I would have never done that to the 'roo.) But the vague threat troubled Reggie, even when I told him I was joking, and subsequently, I was confined to the navigator's seat.

REACHING THE RED CENTER

Now, after some excruciating washboard roads east of Alice Spring, we had finally reached the Red Center of Australia and Uluru—Ayer's Rock to us white folks. We planned to hike to its summit and rose early to beat the heat, but found ourselves in a queue with about 5000 Japanese tourists who had also arrived before dawn. The climb was difficult and steep, but the view on top was stunning, when I could see past the bobbing heads of my fellow travelers, posing for endless photos of one another. Unlike a mountaintop view here, that exposes endless combinations of ridges and fins and meadows and mountains, the view from atop Uluru was striking for its monotony. Except for the Olgas, an outcrop of sandstone 80 kms west. The horizon was as flat and featureless as western Kansas. We were heading into flat country.

The plan all along had been to go west on dirt roads that would take us almost 1000 miles through some of the most unpopulated country in Australia. Except for occasional roadhouses, "services" did not exist. West of the Giles Weather Station, we originally intended to travel southwest along the Great Central Road to the mining town of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, then south to the coast at Esperance.

But as we drank a cup of tea and loaded the ute, Reggie proposed a change. "I think we should be totally MACHO (pronounced 'match-o' in Welsh) and take the north road—the OLD Gunbarrel Highway!" he exclaimed. "It'll be something to remember!"

I checked the map and found the divide, where the Great Central road turned to the southwest. The Old Gunbarrel Highway, planned and constructed by Aussie Legend Lem Beadell after World War II, wound to the northwest, toward Wiluna. It looked barren and grim.

"What about the road?" I asked. "We know nothing about it."

"No worries," said Reggie. "No wuckin' furries. No Davey Murrays." He was sure it would be just fine.

"But this takes us away from the south coast and from Esperance," I complained. "And what about Albany and Walpole? We won't see any of that."

Reggie was adamant. "Nobody does the Gunbarrel in the heat of summer...nobody. You always want to get away from the crowds. Here's your chance."

I could hardly argue with that. And it was his car. And he turned out to be right...or almost. Almost nobody drives the Gunbarrel in the heat of summer. But just to be safe, Reggie called the police at Wiluna, at the far west end of the Gunbarrel, just to let them know we were coming. "This way," said Reggie, "if anything goes wrong, they'll come looking for us. I feel safer already."

We tried to fill the petrol tank at Warburton, an Aboriginal community that did not allow whites to enter—they'd had enough of us—but a road house on the outskirts of town provided limited services. Somehow we forgot to fill the water bottles (sort of a bad move) but we spotted a bore pump on the map, 30 kms ahead. It took a bit of priming but we finally established a decent flow of brackish water. Neither of us had wanted to invest in water containers so we saved all our plastic pop bottles and managed to fill them all. Just beyond the pump, the road forked. It was Reggie's last chance to change his mind, but he seemed determined.



January in Western Australia is mid-summer. Temperatures climb above 100 degrees and the humidity may reach 80%. With conditions like this, we made the turn onto the Gunbarrel Highway—I didn't feel "matcho" at all.

Reggie and I had only traveled a few miles down the Gunbarrel when we saw a vehicle coming our way—it would be the only car we'd see for almost a week. It was a well-equipped Land Rover, one of those BritsAustralia rentals that comes with a plethora of accessories including a snorkel on its carburetor; we flagged them down. We were concerned about the quality of the road—were there sand dunes ahead, we asked? Road washouts? Deep ravines and tricky ledges? The couple, German, I think, shook their heads wearily. None of those obstacles posed a problem it would appear.

But repeatedly, they said, "Corrugation....corrugation," in a dull monotone.

As if a little washboard road would be a problem for us. We breathed a sigh of relief and waved merrily to the young Germans who could barely muster a smile.

What was their problem, we wondered? A few minutes later, we found out.

THE GUNBARREL

Photographs don't do it justice. The Old Gunbarrel Highway looks like an easy two track sandy road—it's flat as featureless as the land around it. No steep hills to climb. Only an occasional stretch of sand. But like the Fraulein said...it's the corrugation. This washboard road was like nothing we'd ever experienced. The ridges of corrugation were not tightly grouped the way the road to Chaco Canyon is, for example. You can't gather speed and drive over the tops of the ridges. These ridges looked like gentle ocean waves, slowly undulating every 16 inches or so. Just enough distance between ridges to make high-speed traveling absolutely impossible. We tried to gain speed and it

beat us and the ute and everything inside it to pieces. We discovered, in fact, that any speed over 10 mph was prohibitive. It could not be done.

We were 300 miles from the nearest human, a ranch called Carnegie Station, and more than 600 miles from a paved road. We had no "macho" maneuvers ahead of us. This would be an adventure in endurance, we soon realized. Days of it.

The temperature reached 105. The road rarely deviated from a straight line. From one of my Aussie history books, I learned that Beadell and his work crew had built the road in the 50s in the course of just a few months. It was a Cold War project—an evacuation road of sorts and only the second route (at the time) that crossed the Australian continent. They called it the Gunbarrel Highway because it was as straight as a gunbarrel. There was no reason not to go straight...there were no obstructions. Nothing.

But there were flies. The Australian bush flies, to be exact, which greeted us each morning at first light in numbers that conjured memories of horror movies and bad dreams. But this was really happening! It was impossible to answer the call of Nature, once the sky began to lighten in the east. The flies loved bare bottoms at dawn. And so we developed our routine. We'd awaken by 4am, go to the great outdoor toilet (being careful to avoid the spiny cactus-like spinifex which grew abundantly), strike the tents, gulp down a quick cup of tea, then start our 10 mph daily 16 hour drive. Reggie still wouldn't allow me behind the wheel, despite our limited speed. It would have been impossible to run over a kangaroo; under these circumstances, we couldn't even keep up with one, but Reg insisted. He began to nod off from time to time and the ute would drift to one side of the road, hit the embankment and bounce back to the middle. We must have looked like a carnival bumper car to the wedgetail eagles floating on invisible thermals, far above. We both began to hallucinate and exhibit strange behavior. At one point, the bouncing awakened me from a deep sleep and I swore he'd run over a giant lizard...a heath monitor perhaps or a giant gowanna. About five minutes later I said, "Did you see that giant lizard? You may have run over it."

Reggie slammed on the brakes, we skidded to a stop and he leapt from the car. "I don't believe it!" he yelled and began to run up the road from whence we'd just come, in search of the giant lizard. A half hour later he returned, glassy-eyed and stumbling. "I

didn't see any damn lizard," he mumbled as he climbed back in the ute. We drove on.

On the fifth day, storm clouds gathered west of us and we could see lightning bolts strike the distant spinifex plain. "I hope it pisses down rain!" Reggie exclaimed. The next morning we began to encounter puddles but could never catch the rain itself. The temperature hovered above 100 degrees but the humidity was overwhelming us. As we rattled along, I noticed something odd—my jeans had expanded at the waist; when I stood up they practically slid off my hips. Later I realized I'd lost 15 pounds just sitting in the front passenger seat of Reggie's ute, bouncing up and down, 16 hours a day in 100 degree heat. The Gunbarrel Weight Loss Program—I don't recommend it.



THE BOG

Earlier in this narrative I mentioned Reggie's penchant for a clean and tidy car. Now, a thousand miles from anywhere, on one of the longest 4WD roads in the world, Reg began to drive around the puddles in the road, for fear of splashing mud on his beloved ute. Despite the rain, the road surface was firm, the berm was not. Our luck ran out when Reggie swerved left to avoid a particularly large puddle that must have been an inch deep and hit a particularly viscous mud bog. The ute lurched forward in the quagmire, trying to free itself, but finally gave up and settled into the muck like a calf in quicksand—resigned to its fate.

It could have gone either way, that next 30 seconds. Had either of us allowed our impulses to play out, the authorities might have found us, months later, two desiccated skeletons, bony fingers wrapped tightly around what remained of the other's neck, in that Grip of Death. It was that close.

Eventually we took out our frustrations on the mud. We had no shovel, so we used Reggie's sauce pans, to scoop the goo, but with every potful, the hole re-filled. It was hopeless.

If there was a silver lining to this, it was that we'd buried the ute in mud only 30 miles from Carnegie, our one and only chance for human contact (and a tow truck) in almost 1000 miles. Reggie nobly offered to make the hike and I graciously let him. Whatever else one might say about Reggie Gubbins, that little Welsh dude can walk. He sets his stride, gets his arms pumping like a British soldier and moves steadily forward at a even pace, mile after mile. I knew he could do it. He left at sunset when the temperature became a bit more tolerable and I watched him vanish over the lip of the horizon, a few minutes later.

I shoveled goo for another hour, for lack of anything else to do, and finally crawled into the tent. The heat was so oppressive I could not sleep. Throughout the night I could hear the strangest sound...every 12 seconds I could hear an expulsion of air, as if someone was turning the pressure release valve on a compressor. Pfffffffffffff! It scared me for a while until I remembered there were no flesh-eating animals big enough in Western Aus-

tralia to truly menace me. I decided it might be a herd of wild camels.

About an hour after dawn, I thought I detected the low grade rumble of a truck pulling a low gear. Minutes later, the noise was more distinct. Never did anything sound so good. A few minutes later, I met Ian Smith, the manager of Carnegie Station, one of the largest cattle ranches in this part of the state, and his foreman, Peter Buchanan. They'd seen Reggie come out of the east, marching with all deliberate speed and could not believe their eyes. Ian is reported to have turned to Peter and remarked, "The things you see, mate, when you don't have a gun." They were under the impression that Reggie had walked the entire distance from Ayers Rock but he quickly explained our predicament. They arrived in a souped up Land Rover, made all the more attractive to me by the big electric winch secured to the front bumper.

"Hell," said Peter. "Where's the big puddle that you went around?" By now the water had all but evaporated.

We secured the cable to the tow eye and hoped for the best. For the better part of a minute, Peter rolled in the cable and it became so taut I thought it would snap. The ute seemed determined to become a permanent fixture in the Great Sandy Desert. But finally, the ute broke free. It was as if the bog had just puked up her prisoner. We were free at last.

Ian refused to take any money for saving our sorry asses and when we reached Carnegie Station, he and his wife set us up in the bunkhouse. Ian said, "Well mates, anybody dumb enough to drive the Gunbarrel Highway in the middle of the summer without a winch and with saucepans for shovels, at least deserves a beer or two." He gave us a wink. "Come on over and we'll give you something to eat too."

We stayed for two days. Faye and Ian treated us far better than we deserved and when we left, Ian said, "Well you look better than you did when you got here...remember to get a shovel." We promised.

WILUNA

We still had 300 miles to go and we were stopped for a night by a swollen river that looked for a while as if it might never go down. But it did. We finally made Wiluna and Reggie sought out the police to let them know we were ok.

The officer behind the desk smiled, slightly. "What are you saying? You're reporting to us that you're alright?"

"Well yes," said Reggie. "I called last week to let you know we were coming across the Gunbarrel...you know, just in case something happened."

The cop thought that was pretty funny. "In case something happened?" he chuckled. "Did you think we would send out the militia if you failed to show? Hell mate, I don't think anyone here even remembers your phone call."

"So if we'd been stranded..."

"We'd come gather your bones once the weather cooled."

We reached Geraldton and the beautiful Indian Ocean two days later. The enormity of our trip only began to sink in when I told other Australians about the ordeal. To this day, many trips to Western Australia later, I have yet to meet an Aussie who's made the journey. But when I tell them my story, they always echo Ian Smith's sentiments. They say, "Anybody stupid enough to drive the Gunbarrel Highway in summer with saucepans for shovels deserves a beer."

That's why I love Australians.

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