

TAKE THE LONG WAY HOME

Mike Oulton

Water in Lake Eyre two years in a row was too much to ignore, so off we go again. This year we took a straight tail Cessna 182 filled to the brim with Mike, Annie, Alister our youngest son, his mate Ben and as little baggage as possible. We calculated a 5 kg allowable baggage each after weighing all concerned. Annie could only manage to get down to 9 kg so all I was allowed was 1 kg. My seat was permanent but the other three took turns up front and made my job a little easier.

Gympie was cold and misty on departure but the weather was crisp and clear en-route. We made Roma in good time and refuelled with avgas and coffee. Charleville next with equally good weather and even a little tail wind on the way. The fuel man heard our inbound call and was waiting with the fuel nozzle in hand and wasn't all that happy when we asked to use our Shell Carnet Card. We were informed that Shell would cancel all Carnet Cards on 30 June and then there would be no option. We have used the same card in July so don't know what the truth is at this stage. A pie and more coffee at the snack bar to break the journey.

Quilpie next for lunch as we decided this trip would not be an endurance race. Our inbound call was responded to by a Sky Trans Dash 8 also inbound from the east and about 10 nm behind us, so the race was on. On joining a downwind for runway 09 we were sighted and although offered to give way to the larger aircraft were asked to continue as they were joining a wider circuit. A tight circuit saw us landed and off the runway before the Dash 8 turned base. A short walk into town and a deep fried disgusting lunch in the pub without the option of a wash down with beer, made our walk back to the airport longer than we remembered. The final leg for the day was a 20 minute trip to our opal miner mate for the night.

The dirt strip was good but stony and as long as we kept the taxiing speed up there was little chance of propeller damage. The deep ditch we needed to transverse to taxi up to the camp was another story however. Last visit we were in a tail dragger and although scary, it was no problem. This time we shut down and pushed the 182 across with plenty of willing hands, just as well as the prop would almost certainly have picked up a modification or two.

Eric, his daughter Jodie and her Dutch husband Kone gave us a magic tour of the mine and surrounding hills. During the tour we heard a wild goat crying on top of the ridge and being answered by twin kits lost and hungry. We found the nanny stuck in a deep crevice and very distressed. The saying "as nimble as a mountain goat" suddenly took on another visual image, as she certainly was in no position to be described in any way other than clumsy and with no options. Jodie went to fetch a rope and a wiry and strong Kone who was still playing with his excavator, to help retrieve the stressed creature. His first response was "is she fat enough to eat" but Jodie soon put that suggestion to bed. I was ready to help and expected him to lasso her horns with a rope and drag her out with the ute but he just climbed down the crevice, grabbed the horns with his hands and lifted her up to me. Ben hung on to me while we pulled her out and released her, half expecting her to turn and sink her horns into my thigh or worse, but she just scarpered around the back of the ute and within a couple of minutes was reunited with her kids, a great ending to a fun day. That night while we were sitting around a fire and eating a BBQ dinner (beef I think?), we saw a very bright light travelling west to east across the black sky. It was too bright and high to be an aircraft and too consistent to be a falling star, so was it a genuine UFO? Later that week it was reported to be the international space station and was observed by many around the country.



GOAT COUNTRY ESCARPMENT

Next day we were asked if we wanted to walk the side of the airstrip to see if there was any opal bearing rocks that had been missed. During the mining process when the large boulders are removed, the smaller remains are sorted and spread out with a modified scraper, and this material was where we were looking for opal. We all found some although most were not worth anything except nostalgic value to us, but fun all the same. After morning tea we were off to Birdsville.

Our flight to Birdsville took us over some diverse country including Lake Yamma Yamma which was full of water, and the channels feeding it were spectacular and supported a good many birds of all descriptions. The patterns of green, red, black and brown were outstanding. From there we flew over Haddon Corner, the most NE point of South Australia where it meets the Qld border. Nothing much there except a fence post and hut where you can record your name if so inclined.

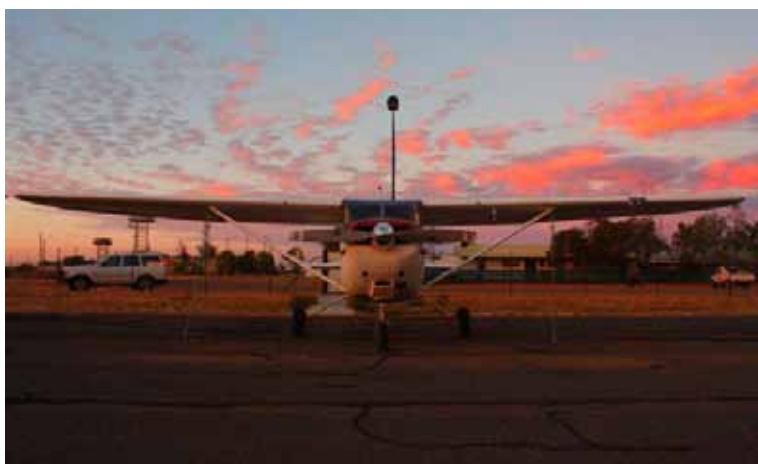
Birdsville is a great stopover with comfortable accommodation and good food all just over the fence from the aircraft parking area. The only downside is the price of avgas at \$2.60 per litre. We took 3 collapsible 20 litre fuel containers with us and as the 182 has an STC to operate on ULP we took the opportunity of \$1.52 for premium unleaded at the servo. The money saved bought us all dinner and drinks that night. Although there was nothing wrong with purchasing ULP we felt guilty and did not wish to offend Gus the refueller, so we tried to be as discrete as possible and not be seen walking into his area with fuel in backpacks purchased elsewhere. But the inevitable happened and as we were opening the gate he appeared from nowhere, so we tried to look as innocent as possible, but was very difficult with what must have looked like 3 Ninja Turtles with green backpacks heading towards the aircraft.. Annie was most amused and took some video evidence of the Ninja march.



SUNDOWN AT THE MINE



INTERESTING COUNTRY SCENERY
EAST OF BIRDSVILLE



ON THE GROUND AT BIRDSVILLE

The pub was overflowing that night with caravan, camping and pub dwellers, so getting a table in the restaurant was a mean feat. The boys took turns in reconnaissance and eventually a table turned up so we reluctantly had to leave our spot at the bar.

Next day saw us over Big Red sand hill about 15nm west of Birdsville. The track was still cut by water so the road folks had to divert around it and miss out on the famous sand hill 4WD climb. On to Dalhousie Springs via Poeppel Corner where Qld, 2



SA and NT meet, and of course did a lap overflying all three borders. The western road track goes all the way from Birdsville to Dalhousie Springs but was a bit north of our track but we kept a good lookout for it on the way. It is a remote part of the Simpson Desert and if we needed to ditch I was planning to land close to the track so we wouldn't be quite so isolated. Although the track was our focus it went over numerous sand hills, so a good option would have been to land across the road parallel to the dunes.



BIRDSVILLE

Dalhousie Springs has a good dirt strip and is a great place for a break and a hot spring swim to freshen up, but you need permission from the Dept of Environment and Heritage prior to landing. I called them 4 days prior to our departure from Gympie and left a message but got no response, so assumed we could arrange our permit on arrival and prior permission was no longer required. That was a wrong call as we soon found out after landing. We paid our permit fee to a couple living in a caravan at the airstrip wearing official looking polo shirts and again assumed all was well and



BIG RED SANDHILL AND TRACK CUT BY FLOODS

they showed us the walking track to the hot springs. Apparently volunteers look after park fees etc and take turns to camp at the springs for a time. Soon after while we were half undressed getting ready for a therapeutic dip, a National Parks truck turned up and a couple of angry rangers got out. The chief knew who I was as he had received my message, so he challenged me as to why we had landed without permission. I explained the situation but he said he had left a message on my phone advising I would have to get a formal landing authority from head office in Adelaide. We had been out of mobile range for 2 days and I put forward my position again and reiterated that I had phoned 4 days prior to leaving. A bit of rugby league diplomacy followed and we were getting nowhere until Annie came in from the sideline and threatened a red card which diffused the standoff. He took our details and put us on report to head office and we were to expect a stern letter, and then said we may as well enjoy our stay and go for a swim, which we did. Two other couples were close by and told us they tried to get a permit from Mt Dare Station on the way to the springs and were told they had run out of permits and not to bother, so it seems there are different rules yet again for the ground folk and the 'silvertail' aviators. The waterhole is fantastic, just about shallow enough to stand on tiptoes and deep enough to swim, although too hot to exercise for more than a few minutes. The further you go upstream, the hotter it gets as the main hot water supply bubbles into the upstream pool. Little fish have adapted to the hot mineral water and constantly pick at your skin for any loose flakes etc. sounds frightening but just feels like gentle prodding with a finger.



DALHOUSIE SPRINGS



SWIMMING AT DALHOUSIE

After a relaxing swim we took off for Mt Dare Station just a short flight NW. After landing we taxied almost to the homestead outbuildings and pegged the aircraft down for the night. The bird life was fantastic and flocks of galas, major mitchell and the odd kite and eagle cruising overhead. The largest Southern Cross windmill I have seen stood abandoned amongst old tractors, cars and farm machinery, but still kept its majestic aura. All the homestead buildings are surrounded by a metre and a half high earth levy, and we were told that this year's flood water came to within centimetres of breaking through the levy. Another Turtle March saw us refuel with ULP while Annie booked us into our cabin.



MOUNT DARE STATION



REFUELLING AT MT DARE STATION

It was then time to relax in the bar and order our meals. About 30 minutes after our first beer who should turn up but our friendly ranger. We exchanged nods and I was about to ask him had he obtained written permission from the owner to be in the bar but thought better of it. He ordered a beer but was told by the bar staff that credit had been frozen, so I thought this might be my chance to reconcile our earlier altercation and I was about to offer the green can national currency, but was beaten to the draw by his mate, probably just as well as it may have rekindled our water hole discussions. We did however exchange a few niceties at the bar, before our meal was called, so maybe the letter from head office won't be so stern?

Meals were well presented and the steak was big and delicious. We met a group of dirt bike riders from Sydney that had just come from Birdsville on the track we were following. They flew to Alice Springs from Sydney and hired a complete package with 4WD backup, including spare bikes, wheels, camping gear, food etc. Great idea for the city dweller if time is short and you can afford it. Cabins were adequate and the tin shed showers and toilets were an experience. Next morning as there was no mobile reception or internet, I put in a flight plan for Alice over the public telephone which was difficult as the diesel generator was close by and very noisy, so many repeats and raised voices on the phone saw Annie rush out again with the red card, as she thought it was the second half of the SA Rangers and Qld Irish state of origin.

We called Alice Tower for clearance 5nm south of Deep Well, and were advised to continue inbound via VFR Route 5. We were cleared direct to a short right base on 12 as the controller had a Qantas jet inbound and wanted us out of the way. After refuelling and tying down we exited through a GA personal gate and walked up to the main terminal taxi rank. Many taxis were waiting for the Qantas flight and we noticed almost all the drivers were Indian, so it could have been a scene at Brisbane or Sydney airport. I asked our driver how long he was in Alice and he replied 3 years and he really liked the town. Good to see some new arrivals are settling in regional towns.

We unloaded ourselves into a very comfortable family room at Toddy's Backpackers, before heading downtown Alice. About 200m from Toddy's there was a quaint second hand shop and we were dragged in for a look. A TV was turned on in the corner and at that moment a news flash announced that Julia Gillard had just assassinated Uncle Kev. As we hadn't heard any news for a couple of days it came as a bit of a shock. The shop owner was a lovely lady and just as glued to the TV as we were. After a few minutes I noticed a manikin head on a shelf behind the TV with red hair and pointed it out to the owner. We all agreed it could be a Julia replica except for the small nose, but hey with a nose job who would know. The lady said she had a better looking red wig, and I offered to do a fibreglass nose reconstruction, so the price just went up from \$10 to \$1000. We were still transfixed to the TV when a very sneezy ill looking man came up to us within a metre and spluttered in our faces "would ya take ten bucks for the jerry can" I backed away as he said "don't worry I've just come out of hospital, but I'm all right now" He managed to clear us out of the shop in seconds.

Goat Hill at sunset next and along with Anzac Hill is a must to get the best views of Alice at sunset and after that a tour of the watering holes after dark. One of our favourites was Annie's Place Backpackers Bar not just for the name but a great atmosphere and a live band that even got the 'olds' tapping along. During a music break a well inebriated young man was doing the rounds with a cowboy hat and getting a swag of change. His sales pitch was he was collecting for the band's charity as they were not paid for the gig. As soon as the band appeared again he was nowhere to be seen, so I guess we were had, but good on him for the initiative. Bojangle's was another venue with more of the 70's music, but the boys suffered a bit so we all had our turn. The Mt Dare/Sydney motorcycle gang were also there grooving to the music and that gave us a clue of their vintage. Two days in Alice was just enough to see The School of the Air, The Flying Doctor, Famous Women in Australia (too soon for Julia), The Old Gaol, \$5 meals and \$8 jugs of beer at Toddy's.



JULIA AND A BIG VEE ON GOAT HILL

We emailed Ayers Rock/ Connellan airport from the backpackers 24 hours prior, to get permission to land. They responded very quickly and we were given the OK as long as we paid the \$55 on arrival. The very nice man actually gave us a discount for paying at the airport management office.

After leaving Alice we tracked out via VFR Route 8 which took us over Hermannsburg and on to Kings Canyon. We initially had planned to land at Kings Station and take a tour to the canyon but decided just to fly over instead. Having seen it from the air I think it was the right choice as it was not the most spectacular gorge we have seen, but nonetheless impressive and worth a fly over. A CA radio operator gives traffic advice at Ayers Rock which is a great service and would be very useful during busy periods.



Both Shell and BP have avgas carnet card facilities at \$1.95 and \$1.97 / litre, so we filled up ready for the next morning.

The only sure way to get from the airport to the resort was to hire a car, otherwise you wait for the bus to meet the RPT flights, and then wait for another bus to take you out to the Rock. Hire car was only \$65 per day and worth every cent as it gave us the freedom to explore the area. We drove out there about 27 years ago and camped right under the Rock and climbed it without any restrictions. This time was totally different with the resort and camp site about 10km away and very strict climbing parameters. It was too windy for the two days we were there so the climb was closed, but we did all the walks and cultural things. Interestingly enough we only saw one indigenous ranger amongst all the staff at the rock and at the cultural centre.



MCDONALD RANGES WEST OF ALICE

An hour or so before sunset a flock of R44 choppers flew the VFR route around the Rock. It could have been a scene from MASH but without the stretchers slung from the skids. Sunset saw us at the viewing area together with 100 or so other cars. It was spectacular and just like the postcard photos but vastly more real and personal. A very scrawny looking dingo casually walked by about 20 meters away and was spotted by only a few as most were transfixed to the red rock. It set the scene for a truly wonderful outback experience.



WAVE FORM, AYERS ROCK

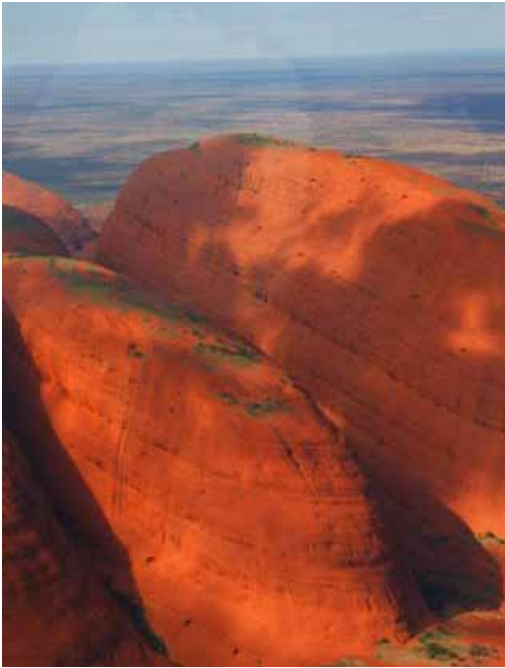
That night at the outriggers backpackers bar, we were treated to a cook your own BBQ. We all tried roo, emu and crocodile meat with an all you can eat salad and veggies. The Japanese folk thought they were off the planet as they had probably never seen such a thing especially with all that meat for a reasonable \$27. Live music from a very talented guitarist made the scene just perfect. At about 11.00pm we were well fed and watered and about to call it a day when we heard the rugby between the Wallaby's and Ireland start on the TV. We were pulled between our support of Australia or the Irish but watched a great close game with lots of running rugby so it didn't really matter who won. Annie had long gone to bed when I got back in the early hours, and apparently took some time to find the lock and open the door, after all it was dark and I can't remember it being a problem.



THE RED ROCK

Next day we saw the sunrise behind the rock and did more walks and tourist things. After lunch and a rest we headed off again from the airport and followed the VFR route around the Rock and Olgas. It was spectacular scenery, especially the deep crevasses and round rock tops of the Olgas. We then tracked for Curtin Springs.

The airstrip is about 2km from the homestead and the deal is that people wanting to be picked



THE OLGAS



AYRES ROCK

up after landing were requested to buzz the homestead. Not often do you get permission to fly low over a homestead so we made sure we could be heard and combined it with a base leg. On finals we saw an object on the runway that was moving in the most awkward manner. It was heading away from us so we continued landing expecting to apply power again and go around. The object became recognisable as a juvenile camel and as we got closer he was looking over his shoulder and galloping with all the power he could muster to get away from the noisy white 'eagle' that was about to attack him - a very funny sight.

Soon after we pegged down, Peter Severin the owner of the station turned up in an old Mercedes, his chariot as he described it, and drove us to the homestead. He used to own a C-210 some time ago and fly provisions etc to remote Aboriginal communities. His stories and antidotes about the station kept us amused, as did all the jokes and other reading matter posted on the bar walls. A bottle of port was noticed on the shelf with the Curtin Springs logo and described as F...ing Good Port. We shared a bottle of Half Mile Creek red wine with dinner and it wasn't bad either. The air conditioned cabins were very comfortable and we all had a good kip that night.



GALLOPING CAMEL

Aviaries with every type of parrots and budgerigars around the homestead were worth a look, and two tame emus strolled around the grounds inquisitively checking out all the strangers. A camper's dog got a bit close to one of the emus, and the contest was on. The emu put its head down and ran at the dog, chasing it around the car park, and when the dog reacted and stood its ground, the emu lashed out with its claws and soon had the dog retreating. Suddenly the tame looking emu wasn't so tame and after winning the bout, just continued to strut around and look as ridiculous as ever, but now with an air of superiority about it.



DOG ATTACKING EMU

We booked our chariot ride out to the airstrip in the morning and said our goodbyes to Peter. The camel turned up again but ran into the bush as we started the engine. Mt. Connor was directly on track to Cadney Homestead on the Stuart Highway. It is a huge monolith, bigger than Ayers Rock but with a flat top and sheer sides sticking out from the desert floor. We had a good close look as there aren't the same restrictions for air traffic as is the case at the Rock, very different scenery but spectacular nonetheless.



MT CONNOR



The airstrip at Cadney is right beside the homestead and you can get avgas in drums, but we elected to use ULP for obvious reasons. Gary the owner very kindly lent us his car and trailer so we could transport the fuel backpacks to the aircraft, so a Ninja March wasn't necessary this time. After an enjoyable lunch we were off to Oodnadatta.

Just after we pegged down at Oodnadatta, we saw a Drifter with 2 people join the circuit and land. I thought it was local but after talking to the folks, we found out they had spent the last 3 days flying from Darwin, in a Drifter, mad I'd say. The pilot bloke was sitting in the back and had his wife up the front, and she was completely rugged up, so maybe not so mad after all. They had their swags and all their gear strapped to the sides and it looked like (and sounded like) a fat bumble bee buzzing around with no plan to get anywhere.



OODNADATTA SIGN

It was a 10 minute walk to the Pink Roadhouse where we were shown to our cabin. The roadhouse is the only shop in town and had a great sign on display at the shop entrance "No Service If You Are Wagging School" The camp site was awash with 4WD's, caravans, tents and swags and all the cabin accommodation was full, so it was just as well we booked in advance. We decided to have a shower as soon as we arrived to get the benefit of hot water before all those people started to line up.

We toured the only attractions in town other than the Pink Roadhouse - the Railway Museum and the Transcontinental Hotel. What a grand name for an outback pub with no beer on tap. After dinner at the Pink, we went back to the pub and met some colourful characters including the mad Drifter pair huddled around a welcome fire set in a 44 gallon drum. Alister and Ben were experimenting with night photography while we were telling the usual flying lies. A large indigenous man called Geoffrey went off to find more firewood and would not trust anyone but Annie to look after his drink while he was away. When he came back he was all over her and wouldn't leave her side and obviously had a serious crush on her. As luck would have it he became interested in Alister's camera and asked to take some photos, of Annie of course. While he was still playing with the camera we slipped away into the darkness back to the sanctuary of the Pink and all its tourists.

Next day saw us head over Lake Eyre and follow the Cooper Creek to where it flooded across the Birdsville Track, south of Mungerannie. We were planning a stop over at Mungerannie but before leaving home we phoned the pub and were advised the station owners had closed the strip to all but the RFDS, so a fly over was all we could do. The Birdsville track has been diverted east around most of the floodwater to a spot about 200m wide where a barge was operating, taking travellers back and forth across the flooded creek. Apparently only cars and bikes are allowed, no caravans or trailers.



BEN, GEOFFREY AND ANNIE



COOPER CREEK CROSSING THE BIRDSVILLE TRACK



The flood is about 30 miles east of the lake and still coming down although the channel is flowing, so there is still a bit more water to make it into the lake.



FLOODED COOPER CREEK



DIG TREE



THE FACE TREE

We then followed the Birdsville Track north at low level and checked out the traffic or lack thereof before heading to Innamincka. We had time so we over flew to The Dig Tree airstrip, landed and spent an hour at this interesting historical site before heading back to Innamincka for the night.

After checking in at the hotel we found our comfortable family room in the bunkhouse. We had arranged to meet our friends Ian and Sharon from Toowoomba, and true to form they walked into the hotel almost at the same time as us. They were travelling by 4WD and were planning to see the flooded Cooper Creek and channel country. Ian offered to drive us from the servo with our fuel backpacks to the airport which saved us what would have been a long Turtle March.

There was an older English couple in one of the other bunkhouse rooms beside ours, and while I was in the shower room, got a knock on the door and the London accented lady called out "is there a baaf in there" Not wanting to reveal my Irish heritage replied "na mate this is Outback Stralia, only showers out here" She apparently was quite put out that there were no baafs in Innamincka.

In the morning there was a line up of 4 aircraft warming up at the airstrip. A Cessna 206, a 172, Dick Lang's Bush Air Safaris Navajo and us. Noccundra Hotel was our next stop for fuel and coffee. What a fabulous stopover. The hotel is heritage listed and one of the oldest buildings in the area built in 1882. It has quaint low ceiling and doors and a real old English pub feel about it. The airstrip was in pretty good condition albeit a bit stony and we taxied right up to the backdoor of the hotel where the fuel pumps are located. A few caravan travellers were about and our aircraft at the pump raised an eyebrow or two, and in no time a crowd appeared with cameras abound. It was before 10am so no soul was stirring at the hotel, but after a few minutes a dressing gown clad lady appeared. After our good mornings I asked could we buy some fuel and she replied a very definite "no" For a moment I was stumped as we may not have has sufficient to get to Thargomindah, but soon worked out she meant avgas. "The old girl takes ULP I replied" a surprised look and a hesitant OK was sufficient to get us filled up with fuel and coffee.



TAXIING TO THE FUEL BOWSER



COFFEE AT NOCCUNDRRA HOTEL

We were planning to land at Thargomindah for lunch but after working out the long walk into town, a team meeting agreed on Eulo instead

Another lovely little town with the airstrip only 300m from the servo, so the Turtle March was



EULO OPAL SHOP

easy this time. A pub lunch and a check out of the store, local honey, leather shop, opal sales, double decker bus and 'bomb shelter'. It's hard to understand what the bloke was thinking who made the shelter during World War 2. It is a half moon shaped 20m long about a meter high corrugated iron construction in the back yard of the shop. More like a large dog kennel than a people bomb shelter. It didn't seem strong enough to repel a penny banger let alone a Japanese bomb, but I guess the same person who made the shelter thought the Japanese were intent on bombing Eulo. It has however past the test of time and is an interesting part of history.



THE NINJA TURTLE MARCH

Onwards to Kuballi owned by our good friend Paul, a sheep, cattle and goat property between Bollon and Goodooga. He even had the strip graded prior to our arrival. After greetings and tea, we were treated to the farm trip where we saw an abundance of wild life. On our way back to the homestead Paul stopped to show us an emu nest with the bird sitting. Male emus do the nest sitting and rearing, and this one was doing his thing. We didn't want to disturb him but Paul assured us it was OK, and when we got closer he jumped up and took off. There were two very large green and yellow 'eggs' that looked rather strange and on closer inspection revealed to be paddy melons. The poor emu must



EMU 'EGGS'

have thought his female partner was ill and left him odd looking eggs, but being a devout parent, took on the job of hatching in any case. I wonder how he will handle the disappointment when they go rotten and squishy. That evening before dinner we went to the artesian bore for the mandatory hot water dip under the stars. Dinner was a very tasty goat goulash and together with some good home brew beer and more flying adventure lies, it made a fabulous end to a long day.



PAUL'S STRIP AND HOMESTEAD

Another farm trip was organised for the boys the next day. We saw a group of not so nice wild pigs that do so much damage to the land and one had a bad day and ended up dead with no legs and arms. We took the limbs home for freezing and dog meat. This year has been particularly bad for pigs as it has been good seasonal rain with floods earlier in the year. Paul has several Hungarian families come up from Melbourne each year and they bring with them trailers, freezers, butchering equipment etc.

They reduce the pig population to a manageable proportion and cook the meat and make sausages, salamis, csabai, goulash and other yum Hungarian dishes. Wild goats are not considered vermin any more as Paul musters and sells them for export goat meat. We departed after lunch and the boys found the emergency rations, and as there was little chance of needing them from here on, we tucked into the chocolate bars and cheese dips on our way home. After a 3 hour flight we landed on the farm at about 4.15pm. It was all over till the next time.

Statistics:

- 24.5 hours total flying
- 2864 NM travelled
- 1217 litres fuel burnt
- 19 take offs and landings

Maintenance Issues:

- compass fluid leak
- dirty aeroplane
- dirty laundry
- happy people