

THE FAIRY TELEGRAPH...

Every day, a long line of prepped 4x4s takes on Australia's epic Old Telegraph Track. And



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every day, there are those that fail horribly...



Having shipped our Toyota Land Cruiser all the way from the Netherlands to Australia, we were determined to make the most of our time Down Under prior to driving it home. We travelled extensively during the course of a year and a half, covering as much as possible of this vast nation – including a memorable trip north from Brisbane through the wilds of Queensland.

This started quite sedately, with a mixture of national parks and rambling cattle ranches, but we scored a major stroke of luck on the Capricorn Highway when we saw a massive low-loader, carrying a nine-metre wide steel bucket, which was having a wheel changed. We didn't realise it at the time, but when it was grinding along the road, people were having to take a 65-mile detour to get round it. So we were very fortunate that it was parked up when we arrived – as were not one but three police cars accompanying it!

They don't do small things in Oz...

They don't do low temperatures, either. Which was a problem as our Land Cruiser's air-con was needing a re-gas. And of course the further north we travelled, the hotter the weather became. It says something that in the mining town of Emerald (they mine coal there, rather confusingly), whose population is only about 13,000, there are six air-con specialists. Sorted.

This meant we could cruise with our windows shut, which was good because of the dust but also because of the remarkable number of dead kangaroos we saw rotting by the roadside. Delightful.

Much more pleasant was the company at one campsite after another, where we made friends with all sorts of other travellers from Australia and New Zealand. These included Jesse, 78, and his wife Chris, who refused to accept that old age should be any impediment to travelling around the world. Quite right too!

Top: A fairly unprepossessing sign marks the start of the Old Telegraph Track – and, for the vehicles that leave Cape York on a rescue ship, the beginning of the end

Below: Fording is fun, and sometimes it's necessary. But when you're depending on your vehicle to get you back to civilisation – and back to Europe – drowning it for the sake of laughs is not what you want to be doing





It's well known that in Australia, everything wants to kill you. Road trains and crocodiles, we all know about, though it's nice to see that the national park services think it's worth warning people... malevolent cattle, though, really is a new one on us

Ironically, with the air-con now fixed we found ourselves staying in bed until half past eight the next morning as we waited for the sun to put some warmth into the air. That's always the way in the desert, though this was early June – winter in Australia, when the top temperature for Queensland is only about 36° rather than the very high forties you get in December and January.

Eleven bumpy hours on a dirt road took us to the Kennedy Highway, aka National Route 1 – it sounds grand, but at times it's just a single strip of asphalt bounded on both sides by red sand and

endless miles of scrubby bushland. The landscape became more hilly as we continued north, stopping at Mount Garnet Roadhouse to refuel before visiting some friends who had bought some land in Ravenshoe and built themselves a house (as you do in Oz).

Stopping to take a walk in the rainforest of Mount Hypipamee National Park, we continued north through the mountains of the Great Dividing Range to Gordonvale, where we reached the plain and the Bruce Highway. Camping at official sites, we met various other travellers with experience of the areas we were going to

visit and learned a great deal of useful knowledge – about permits, for instance, and the need for an onboard radio on the Canning Stock Route. They told us about small, inconspicuous tracks they had found, and about technically difficult trails in the mountains of Victoria. All worth knowing!

We travelled into Cairns to collect a new air mass meter for the Land Cruiser before heading north on the coast road towards Cape Tribulation, swinging through the rainforest while gazing at wonderful views of the Pacific. Somewhere out there is the Great Barrier Reef.

Our campsite was full of Land Cruisers, often pulling camping trailers and usually covered in red dust – a badge of honour here which tells tales of travel on tough off-road routes. On that subject, on a rugged, dusty track north through impenetrable rainforest we encountered our first river crossing. It wasn't a particularly spectacular one, taking us across a creek rather than a real river, but still there is something magical as the road disappears into the water.

We passed Wujal Wujal, an aboriginal community, where signs warned us that we had entered a non-alcoholic area, en route to the





There's something very evocative about the sight of a road disappearing under a river like this. Evocative and perhaps quite intriguing, though not what you'd call come-hither if what you want is to be able to drive home afterwards. As for termite mounds, there's nothing come-hither about them at all. You can see why blindfolded parachuting has never caught on as a sport in this part of the world

beautiful old colonial outpost of Cooktown. Here, our campsite was visited by a wallaby and her babies, who happily nibbled on the grass just a few metres away.

The further north we went, the tougher the vehicles, people and camping trailers we saw. The going had been pretty straightforward up to now, and modern cattle farming has taken the edge off the land's hostility in parts of the Cape York Peninsula – but we knew things were soon going to get much more challenging.

The road was still quite good as we crossed Marina Plains, a vast wilderness of nothing but yellow grass and termite mounds which felt a little like being in the African savannah. Pausing for coffee at a lagoon, signs warned of the presence of crocodiles. The road might be alright, but you're definitely in the wilds out here...

Camping near Coen in the bend of a small river, we spent a day working on the Land Cruiser while being attacked by mosquitoes. The rear diff lock had stopped working, thanks to a broken wire, but with a bit of perseverance we managed to repair it.

By now, another vehicle had drawn up to camp and we got talking to its owners, Chris and Jackie. They were very knowledgeable and had an interesting and appealing vision on many things, and having sat up chatting well into the night we agreed to meet again further down our route at Lockhart River.

The route here was wonderful, with alternating open and dense vegetation, beautiful grass and trees, gravel surfaces and creek cut-

throughs. Closer to the coast, we came again to the mountains of the Great Dividing Range, their flanks shrouded by low tropical rainforest.

Having met up again with Chris and Jackie, we set off together towards the Frenchmans Track. We took a narrow road towards Pascoe River, which we would need to cross, and it was beautiful: by turns narrow, washboarded, bumpy and then again soft and sandy.

As we descended towards the river, the track got worse, asking a lot of man and machine alike. We stopped a few hundred meters before the river and explored the steep descent into it – and a good thing too!

A ranger had told us that according to his sources, the water would not be too high, but that you

had to take account of large stones and boulders. We looked at it. The river was not wide, but it was fast flowing and about knee-high in depth. Worst of all, the exit on the far side was via a steep bank covered in large boulders.

We were quick to agree: it was too risky. So we turned round (itself not easy on the rough, narrow path) and set off to find a less intense crossing place. Just as well, too, because we found that while our rear locker was working fine, now our centre diff was refusing to lock up – meaning we only had front-wheel drive. This meant using speed to get across ground that would much better have been taken at a crawl, so by the time we found our camp site for the night we felt we had done some real off-roading.

Back on smooth, red gravel, we headed to Weipa for provisions and, we hoped, a workshop where we could get our diff lock back in action. At the camp site, where everything is a 4x4, we heard hair-raising tales of people's adventures on the famous Old Telegraph Track, of the savage off-road terrain of the Eldorado trail and of legendary river crossings – which regularly swallow cars whole.

We saw two vehicles ourselves with significant water damage. Later, we heard that about 40 cars had been recovered from these rivers in the last few weeks.

So, would we go for it or take the 'chicken route'? Well, first we needed a working diff lock! Happily, Auto Weipa could look at the Land Cruiser, which they did while we





Madness at Nolan's Brook, the deepest of the crossings on the Old Telegraph Track. The truck was actually afloat here, and being pushed by the guys alongside it. You can see why so many number plates get separated from their original owners. The Jardine River Ferry is at the northern end of the track; here, the captain was delighted to see what he said was his first ever left-hand drive Landcruiser

took a tour of the world's largest bauxite mine.

The tour guide gave us a lift back to the garage afterwards, which was very obliging of him. But unfortunately the diff lock was still not fixed. At best, they could tell us what wasn't the problem.

What this meant was that the Old Telegraph Track wasn't going to be for us. Instead, our next stop was to be Bamaga, where we'd been told we would find a star mechanic. After all the stories we'd heard about wrecked vehicles, this didn't make us too sad!

We met up again with Jackie and Chris at Bramwell Station, at the southern end of the Old Telegraph Track, having spotted an incredibly muddy 70-Series Land Cruiser at Palm Creek Crossing – evidence of the fact that this is where the action is. Walking to

the crossing, we found ourselves part of a sizeable crowd. It seems that driving the track is something of a spectator sport – and an excited rumour was going around that a group of hardcore off-roaders from Victoria were on their way. And sure enough, one by one they appeared, applause shattering the peace as they attacked the crossing with heavy right feet and roaring engines.

Using the well signed bypass roads, we drove to Fruit Bat Falls – a picture-perfect swimming spot with water so clear you can see right down to the riverbed. We walked in the fast-flowing Elliot Creek and stayed the night at the busy camping ground by Canal Creek, where once again everyone was in a well prepared 4x4.

The following morning, we took a wander over with coffee in hand to

watch the first vehicles of the day tackling the Canal Creek crossing. It was a little frustrating not to be able to enjoy the driving ourselves, but deep down (pardon the pun we knew this was the right thing for the good of our Toyota. Which still needed to be able to get us home to the Netherlands!

We met up again with Chris and Jackie at the Jardine River ferry, which is basically the northern end of the Old Telegraph Track. The ferry captain was very excited to see our Toyota – his first ever left-hand drive, he told us!

We were excited too, because now at last we were at Bamaga – where we had an appointment with Andy. Andy was very enthusiastically recommended to us back at Weipa, by an Aussie off-roader who knew what he was talking about, and he told us that he'd be able to put our

truck on his ramps in a couple of days' time. Any parts he needed, he'd be able to have delivered overnight by plane from Cairns.

So, that gave us a few days to wait. Overlooking the Endeavour Strait, where a white sandy beach is fronted by palm trees, in a campsite with warm showers and the opportunity to cook fresh food from the local shops, that was no hardship! We passed our time wandering around admiring the many superb Toyotas sharing the site with us, with their great off-road camping gear.

Later on, the group from Victoria who we'd watched crossing at Palm Creek arrived at the camp site. After that, in rolled several vehicles from Bramwell Station. Well, we all take it at our own pace, but eventually you're all together at the tip of Cape York.



You can see why so many kangaroos and wallabies get totalled on Australia's back roads. This inland taipan was asking for trouble, too – though not as much as you'd soon be in if you want anywhere near it





Running repairs in Bamaga, as the saga of the non-functioning diff-lock continues. At least the Cruiser is in a lot better conditions than this lot, though – you’ve got to wonder how many of these once-proud old warhorses were never the same again after an encounter with the Old Telegraph Track

That night, we bid farewell to Chris and Jackie, whose itinerary was to see them heading back south in the morning. And then it was a case of chilling out (not literally, in the tropical heat and humidity) until it was time to head for Cape York Spares and Repairs.

After a bit of dismantling work, the problem was soon evident: the diff-lock actuator was completely corroded. Andy assured us that this was down simply to age and heavy use – but then delivered the bad news that it would take three weeks, and a lot of money, to get a new one delivered from Japan.

Not fancying the sound of that, we did some research of our own and found that we could have a new actuator delivered by surface freight to Darwin and get it fitted there. In the meantime, Andy replaced

the Toyota’s CV joints, which were getting creaky with almost 250,000 kilometres on the clock!

Still, it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good. Losing our diff lock was a major inconvenience and expense, but it was nothing compared to the trouble some people get into on the Old Telegraph Track. Andy told us that he also does recovery on behalf of the Queensland RAC – and that in the previous week alone, he had put nine vehicles ‘on the boat’ after they had fallen victim to the various water crossings.

Yes, there really is a boat. It’s a three-day ferry from Seisia to Cairns, where the facilities exist for these unfortunates to be treated further in terms of salvage.

The crossing we kept hearing about was Nolan’s Brook. This is

the one that eliminates the most vehicles – indeed we bumped into Andy again as he recovered yet another of its victims. So on the way back south, we decided to take one of the bypass routes and go take a look. Obviously we weren’t going to be driving it, but we wanted to see for ourselves what all the fuss was about.

To reach the Nolan, we took a sandy, washed-out trail through the forest to a parking spot just a few minutes’ walk from the crossing itself. We arrived just as a car entered the water: it floated helplessly for a moment, then a

couple of men pushed it forward until its wheels made contact with the bed of the creek. On the far side, the doors opened and waves of water (and clothing) poured out.

On the far bank, a group of about twenty cars was busy with repair work. Stunning new 200-Series Land Cruisers, soaked up to the glove compartment. What a mess!

And to think that if our diff-lock had been working, we might have been tempted to try this. Far better to satisfy ourselves with continuing to see the world from the comfort of a dry, fully functioning Land Cruiser instead!

The authors must be among the best-travelled 4x4 drivers of all time. Since 2002, they’ve been exploring almost non-stop, aboard a variety of vehicles and on every continent in the world. Their website tells a whole world of tales which will make you yearn to pack your life into your truck and head off in search of adventure – you can find it by visiting www.exploringtheworld.nl.

