

HENNESSY'S CUTTING TO BARMAH

The vegetation has changed, this far down the river. There aren't as many big tall straight trees, and the trees are more coppiced. They have more branches, and branches coming from lower down. Multiple trunked, some of them, even the big old ones. Not telegraph pole material. One tree that we tied up to branched about 30 inches from the ground, and ran parallel for a couple of feet, and then joined into the main trunk again.. A bit like a window hole in the tree trunk. Then later it coppiced out again.

There were also a lot more wattles along the bank, and a lot more sulphur crested cockatoos in them. We had sulphur cresteds at night most of the time, but we haven't seen them a lot during the day until we passed through Paddy Hennessy's Cutting, and shortly after that we must have passed hundreds and hundreds. And they were all on the wattles, eating the seeds. From a distance they looked like great big white funny-shaped flowers.



As we were going through one dodgy bit, and we were focused on dodging the snags, two blokes called out from the shore and asked us to give them a hand. They had a white van that they'd bogged in the sand, and they signalled us to pull around onto the beach where they were bogged so we could give them a hand. But we were in the midst of a group of snags and there were snags surrounding this piece of beach. I already had a path worked out that we had to follow, and I couldn't see a way through the snags to get to the beach they were bogged on. I thought even if we could get ashore we wouldn't be much use pushing them. But they didn't understand what we were doing, and how we had to negotiate the snags so carefully. Bill tried to explain to them that we couldn't help – we felt pretty mean – and while he was doing that we did actually bounce off a small snag. We both felt weak that we had disobeyed the first law of the bush by not going to help someone in trouble, but we were literally unable to do so.

For the first week or ten days of the trip there were loads of beautiful sandy beaches – almost on every bend. But the beaches have now disappeared. Admittedly the river is high, so perhaps the odd small beach is now submerged, but basically we are past the beaches, and now the main places to get ashore have been at log landings. These are remnants of where the boats use to pull up to load logs for the mills downstream. No doubt the steamers would also have loaded timber to fire their boilers. Some of these have picnic tables, but mostly they are just places with a level bit of bank, or a bit of a narrow cutting, and a couple of trees to tie up to. No beaches to come against the shore. And the trees grow right on the edge – in many places you can see some of the bank is undercut, so when that collapses, the trees naturally fall in. I just hoped the bank would not collapse as Bill was clambering ashore to tie us up to a tree.



We camped the next night just below the 1808 marker so we must have travelled a bit over 30 km in the day. The river was not all that wide in this section – it was much wider up near Yarrawonga. It was lapping the banks in most places and if the water was a foot higher it would have spread right across the countryside. A lot of trees seemed to have recently just lain over into the river, and their leaves were still quite green – perhaps the wild winds over the weekend knocked them down. So with trees lying into the water from both sides of the bank, it made the river a lot narrower, and we came through a few hairy places. Because the river was so high, snags were marked on the map which were not visible, and we wondered if it was because they were no longer there, or was it because they were just under the water. You can often see the tell tale “V”, but you are not always sure what is a bit deeper under the water. A couple of times we looked out and saw a snag sneaking past, and thought “Wow I never saw that coming”.



After we moored for the evening, I had my shower on the foredeck, which was the sunniest, least windy spot. Then Bill got the water ready for his, and was just about to soap up, when we heard voices in the background! We looked up – and we saw six big orange Canadian canoes coming around the corner, with a dozen blokes in them - mostly aborigines I think. But of all the times to have someone appear out of nowhere, just as he was about to get under the shower! With so little traffic on the river – we were miles from anywhere and we hadn't seen anyone for hours – it never occurred to us to put down the bamboo blinds which are there to give us privacy should we need it.

Yes, they were going like the clappers, and they weren't having to paddle too hard, I reckon they were going half as fast again as we go. And they didn't seem to be all that experienced or to have much control over how they were going, and it is surprising some haven't tipped themselves out. But then again, they only need 2'6" to get through the snags, not 14'. But with that current and that pace, if they ran up a log... Perhaps because they are so light, and the canoes are pretty stable, it would not be a problem. Those canoes are strong too, made out of that moulded plastic with built-in flotation compartments.

The vegetation this morning was verdant in so many places. Beautiful trees overhanging the river, green grass – it almost looked like it had been mowed. Absolutely gorgeous, and lush. But by the afternoon, one or other side of the river, mostly the Victorian side – was starting to look so sad. It looked like it was in its death throes. It looked like every leaf on every tree had seared and withered. And there was this funny native vegetation that was an oatmeal colour all across the ground. Nothing green. It just looked like it had been completely defoliated. And the other side was not like that at all. Green grass, green under-story - all looked well. And then later, the Victorian side, the Barmah forest - was green, and the Moira Forest on the NSW side was dry and brown. I don't know whether it is soil type or what - it is pretty weird the way it changed from one side to the other, so presumably it is not just land management practices.



We stopped at lunchtime at the Picnic Point caravan park, which is the one bit of what you might roughly call civilization that we come into contact with between Tocumwal and Barmah. You come around this bend and suddenly you're confronted with scores of holiday homes. Many of them would be more properly termed shacks. All along the river frontage of the extensive caravan park there were makeshift structures, all with awnings, together with other more permanent buildings. Each had its own little jetty. Boats were stowed under

canvas. There were several houseboats in various stages of luxury and disrepair. Everything seemed to have canvas or polytarp stretched over as roofs. The whole place was not unlike a museum of Aussie bush ingenuity, and had, as a consequence, a refreshingly idiosyncratic charm that I found infinitely preferable to the stultifying conformity you get with modern, 'proper' houses built in holiday settings.



We kept going past more holiday places for several more kilometres. Not a soul in sight. They were all deserted, but they must have been a beehive in the summer holidays. This was all on the NSW side – the Victorian side of the river was just scrubby, struggling forest and not particularly attractive. The river was extremely serpentine in this area, and some of the holiday structures were on narrow spits where the houses facing one reach backed on to the houses facing the next reach round a sharp U-bend, with a gravel service road down between them. But there were truly hundreds of these places, and we speculated on where the owners might come from.

We just idled along most of the time, taking hour on and hour off – one steering and the other as snag scout at the front. A bit of a routine developed. We'd go for 4 hours, at 4km per hour, or just a little bit more, and then we'd stop for lunch and put petrol in, and then we'd go another 4 hours and stop for the evening and put petrol in again. So we knew we had a good 4 hours travelling time at those speeds in the tank, which only holds 1½ litres. We only ran out once – and that was when we were going backwards, for hours on end at high revs against the wind. We worked out it took 10 litres of petrol to do 100km – which is about what I get in the XTrail.

Lots of wrens and kingfishers around in the dense foliage beside the river, and we disturbed several flocks of Nankeen night herons. Twice during the day I saw a snake swimming across the river. One was a large snake that went in in front of us and it ended up a lot further down river than where it went in, by the time it got out on the other side. I am glad it didn't mistake us for the shore,

and try to come aboard. That is one thing I have some misgivings about – why wouldn't a snake think we were solid land, and come aboard? Maybe it was just the heebie jeebies given me by the couple of fishermen we met down there on one of our camping trips – they told us there were lots of tiger snakes in the river in the warmer weather, and to watch out for them. Bill had asked them what would they do if one crawled into their boat – "get out quick" was their reply.

Bill mused about what makes snakes decide to swim across the river. Can a snake even see well enough to know there is land on the other side? Don't they have poor eyesight, and mostly rely on vibrations?

That evening we were approaching the Narrows, or the Barmah Choke, as it is also known. It was only about 3:30, but we didn't want to take on the challenge of the Narrows with the sun so low in the sky, so we began to look for somewhere to stop for the night. As always seems to be the case at times like this there wasn't much on offer, and we began to fear that we might have to go through the Choke that afternoon whether we wanted to or not. We had to consider possible landings that were far from ideal, so in some desperation we pulled into a small side creek which runs to the south, and into which the water from the swollen main river was pouring very fast. Only 20-30 feet wide, the creek had a forest of snags up the middle. We'd chosen this little creek thinking it would be a quiet little backwater, but in fact the water was racing along, and it was pulling us up the creek strongly, into the snags. We were being sucked up, and it was all we could do to get tied up. Up to this time we had always tied ourselves to a tree or other suitable object, but I realised that I would have trouble holding the boat against the current in the morning while Bill went ashore to untie us and then clamber back down onto the boat. So I suggested he pass the rope around the tree trunk and bring the end back on board, and tie it to the front rail. Then all we had to do in the morning was untie the rope and pull it in. We followed that practice every day after that, and it made life a lot easier.

We had been there for a while, (yes - I was just about to have my shower) when we heard the noise of an approaching boat. We looked into the main stream, expecting to see a boat go by, but suddenly this boat came down the tiny little narrow snaggy creek. A tinnie with a bloke and two kids. We were really surprised. So we said to him "How far did you go?" and he replied "Oh, about half way". Which was no help to us. Half way to what? To where? How long is a piece of string? He then explained that although there were some logs across it, this is the main creek that feeds the Barmah lakes. And with the river being this high. the lakes were filling up like mad.



Actually where we moored there was a sign saying "Caution: Tour Boat" which puzzled us a bit, given that we were in the middle of nowhere. But then we realized that there must have been some sort of boat that originally came up though this creek, and did a circuit through the lakes and round the main river. I think with the amount of recent snags, this enterprise must have ceased several years back.

Early the next morning we were ready to face the biggest challenge of the trip. Firstly we had to reverse out into the main stream, and then back upstream a bit to avoid a snag – all against a very strong current. I'd had nightmares about this all night, as I wasn't 100% certain the motor would be able to handle this. I had visions of us being sucked into the snags up this little creek. At least to get out of the creek I had to go backwards, which meant I could see where I was going. But I had to control where the front of the raft finished up, so it wouldn't catch any snags, and allow for the very strong current which was going in two directions – up the creek and down the main river channel. As it happened my sleeplessness was unnecessary, and I was surprised at how well the raft backed out into such a strong current, and I was able to manoeuvre it quite well.

There was about 8 km of very narrow, very snaggy, very fast current. It was a bit like doing a ski slalom. The river was probably only 2 ½ times the length of our boat in width – and made narrower because of the lovely thick, dense vegetation hanging over the river all the way along the Choke. And the snags – hundreds of them. Going down here was a co-operative venture. It would have been very hard if one could only steer from the back without someone up the front telling you where the snags were. And you had to go past one snag while you were thinking ahead and lining up how you were going to approach



the next one and the one after.

Then, quite suddenly we found ourselves down where the river opened out into the Barmah Lakes. It was a beautiful, almost breezeless scene – still early in the morning, probably about 9:30, as we had left at 7:45.



BARMAH TO ECHUCA

Once we got through the Choke we were able to relax and have a cup of coffee – up until then it had been both of us with full concentration. Then the river started to change again. Most of the place was fairly densely vegetated to start with but just before we got to the township of Barmah things started to change yet again and we began to get high cliffs. High clay cliffs. Some with really impressive tree roots on them as well.



We didn't bother to stop at Barmah, after we got through the Choke. It is not a prepossessing town – a few signs saying “No houseboats”, “Private property” and the like. There was one jetty/pontoon that was clearly the public landing area, and it was falling apart. It didn't look safe to land at and the steps up the high bank were steep and rickety-looking. So we went a bit further down and found a nice little place to have lunch.

The day was getting pretty hot, and we couldn't find a good spot to pull in to for the evening – we finished up just tying to some twiggy snaggy branches hanging out from the shore. Hot as it was, you couldn't even get off and go and have

a swim. Upriver where there were sandy beaches it was so easy – mind you the weather wasn't that warm when we were up there so we didn't really swim – but you just waded in on a sloping sandy beach, nice clean sharp sand. Whereas down here it is mud. And once you get into the water it stirs all the mud up as well. It is squelchy and slimy and not very inviting. .

I was having problems down here with the map, as well – in a number of places there were two identical km signs – maybe half a mile apart and you can't tell which is the right one, or which is the one marked on the chart. And then in a couple of places the map seems to even miss a reach or two. Usually you have to work back from pumps, willows or various other landmarks. But sometimes things are not what and where they should be on the map. Just serves to make life more confusing.

When we started off the next morning I did the first session at the helm and Bill was having a little bit of a lie-down on the daybed out of the chill wind. When it was time for him to do his stint at the helm he was not really fully awake and alert, and he took over blearily. He'd only been steering for a matter of minutes, and we were approaching a sharpish bend. Suddenly there was this whopping great three storey paddle steamer charging toward us at full bore. The Emmy-Lou. It was the last thing we expected to find on that part of the river, and at that time of the morning. It was 9:15. You might expect to see some other house-boats, but we didn't expect the equivalent of a luxury cruise-ship. I yelled out to Bill "Get to the right, get to the right", but he calmly replied "Ah no - I think I'll go to the left." Somehow he still hadn't seen the Emmy Lou and he didn't know what I was on about. "Look what's coming!" I yelled. It was so big – I was convinced the sides would touch us as it passed. Of course there was plenty of room as it turned out, but it didn't seem like it as it was coming towards us, and we swerved sharply toward the shore to get out of its way. It had big side paddlewheels, and quite a few people on board, and there was much waving between the two craft. After it went past, the water was really churned up, and it took about 15 minutes to settle down. It wasn't a big wash, it was just that the water had become turbulent and choppy.



We saw quite a few houseboats on our way down the river. The closer we got to Echuca the more numerous they became. They came in all shapes and sizes. Here are some of them.



A very hot strong wind sprang up during the day. It was strong enough almost to set up a sail down some of the reaches. We had to go with a reasonably high throttle setting for most of the day. They were gale force winds. And it was very hot - in the low 40s we heard later on the radio. We stopped early as it was so hot and so difficult to navigate. Later in the evening it cooled down and clouded over and we spent the night about 10 km short of Echuca.

As we approached Echuca we had to decide whether we would do another stretch - through the lock at the Torrumbarry Weir and on to Koondrook and Barham, or call it quits at Echuca for the first leg. We knew the Torrumbarry Lock was dicey if the river was at all low, and though the river was pretty full for us on this leg, we had no idea what it would be like if we came back to do the next leg in the Autumn. A decision to go on would mean another ten days at least with the only civilisation being the caravan park at Torrumbarry. We phoned them to see if we could take the raft out of the water there and store it for the summer, but it was not a goer. Looming large in making the decision was the fact that we had to be back in Newcastle in early December to see a urologist to discuss treatment options for Bill's cancer. What's more, I had the business card of a boat and caravan storage outfit in Echuca that I'd picked up on our recce trip.

As we took off the next morning the wind seemed to grow steadily stronger, so that after about half an hour we had to have the motor almost at full throttle to make any headway at all against it and we just barrelled along into the teeth of it. We stopped for a coffee about halfway at a place where we had good phone reception, and phoned the boat and caravan storage place on the business card. Their rate was \$100 a quarter for storage, and the bloke was prepared to come down to the ramp and help us get the raft out. When we described the detachable outriggers/polypipes to him he said he'd bring his mate's trailer and hopefully his mate as well.

He described where the most suitable boat ramp was (right next to the abattoirs) and we arranged to phone them when we got there, which we did, about an hour later. We were able to pull up at this little sandy beach right next to the ramp and tie up, and he arrived within ten minutes of our call. ("Hello. I'm Roy. Me mate can't come, but we'll be OK"). We explained how the raft disassembled, and how I had to take the bus to pick up the car and trailer from Cobram, and we agreed we'd sleep in the raft that night and pull it out of the water first thing in the morning. Lorraine had earlier ascertained from the local bus timetable (that she'd collected on the recce trip!) that Friday is one of the four days a week that the bus goes back up to Yarrawonga, and that it was due to leave in about an hour. Roy obligingly gave me a lift uptown and I managed to have a bite to eat at a coffee shop before the bus came. Everything just fell into place nicely.

The bus went a roundabout way to Yarrawonga, via Shepparton, and the trip took about 2 1/2 hours. We did three sides of a rectangle. Seeing the country and the towns from a bus put a different perspective on it all for me, somehow. Looking at the view out of the bus window made it feel like I was seeing everything through a camera lens – as though it were more a documentary than reality. Everything had the feel of a Bogdanovich movie from the sixties, and could easily be mistaken for America. Many of the product logos were the same, I was in a Greyhound bus, and sitting opposite me chewing gum was a teenage Aboriginal girl complete with mobile phone, mineral water, and... Nike runners.

The blandishments of consumerism and the need to belong stifle the voice of commonsense across the land, it would seem. Maybe it was just the mood I was in. But I doubt it.

The bus driver let me off at the front gates of the caravan park where I had left the car and trailer, which was right on the Murray Valley Highway. The drive back to Echuca took just under an hour, so by four thirty that afternoon Lo and I were sitting in the raft in the late afternoon sun together (the wind had dropped by mid-arvo) enjoying a scotch that I'd picked up at *The Strathy Pub* on the way back – Strathy being the local argot for Strathmerton, which is between Cobram and Echuca.



AT ECHUCA

Once Bill had set off on his expedition to collect the car, I found myself all alone on the raft, with a collection of odd jobs to do. The large log on the edge of the sandy beach we had tied up to was not quite as solid as we had assumed, and a couple of times when a strong gust of wind came up the log moved a little along the beach, and the raft with it. So I went ashore and found a couple of other things to tie us up to a bit more firmly. Then I did the washing – by hand, in a bucket of river water, as I had been doing all along, and then hung it on the rope along the sides of the raft to dry – fortunately getting clothes dry was usually quite easy because of the wind and the low humidity down there. After taking the rubbish up the hill to the bins at the top of the launching ramp, I started to sort out what we would leave on the raft when we put it in storage, and what we would take back with us in the car. A lot of the stuff we would need until the next morning, but I got some things packed up, and made lists of other things that needed to be put in the car. The weather had improved as the day progressed, and it was quite pleasant, gradually getting warmer and balmier. In what seemed like no time at all I saw the silver X-Trail parked at the top of the hill, and Bill strolling down the boat ramp, armed with a bottle of scotch and a cask of red.

While we were enjoying our sundowner we were entertained by the local boys and their boats. About 5pm they started to arrive. The first was an impossibly shiny black Commodore Ute - of the subspecies that sports a matching flat metal tonneau cover. It was towing a matching impossibly shiny black speedboat – of the subspecies that comes to a point so sharp you'd swear it was a magnified dart. Inside the boat, but sticking up pretty high nonetheless and taking up most of the inboard space, was a matching impossibly shiny black donk – this time accented with brilliantly buffed chromed bits. Going just on the look of it I estimated it to be about a googol horsepower, or thereabouts. It was called *Crazy Horse*.

I found myself wondering how much the whole rig would have set this young bloke back. See, not only was there all of the foregoing, but there were about eight wakeboards (av. price around a thousand bucks going by the ones I saw at Stokesy's), huge floodlights mounted on custom stands, and a sound system that could do satisfactory service at the Hordern Pavilion. Then there were the wetsuits – and the de rigeur cans of Bundy and Coke, and so on and on. The first lot fuffed around till about six o'clock, when they finally roared away, hurtling up the river at Christ knows what speed with their stereos blasting out enthusiastically-imported American black underclass musical culture to an uninterested world. They were quickly followed by another speedboat launching, then another. They all looked sleek and expensive like *Crazy Horse*, the main difference being in choice of paint job, and they all looked like they belonged in Tom Wolfe's book about cosseted hot rods, *The Kandy Koloured Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby*. Wakeboards are about five feet long and ten inches wide, like a wide water ski. They have two places for your feet, some like socks, some like neoprene slippers. The idea is to leap across the speedboat wash at great speed – a bit like a cross between surfing and snowboarding. For several kilometres each side of Echuca the riverbanks are decked out with big signs announcing that water skiing and wakeboarding are prohibited, and that all of it was a no-wash zone. Dunno how much the signage cost, but it clearly wasn't effective.

After it got towards dusk the evening continued to provide lots of noise and activity. Another couple of tinnies came down and were launched just before dark – people going fishing, and on dusk a couple of very large houseboats came by. Echuca was Houseboat Central. The opulence of some of them had to be seen to be believed. One had a rooftop garden complete with palm trees that made the little potted jobs I'd mentioned seeing at Cobram look pretty ratty. One huge one, with advertising all along the side proclaiming it to be an "Executive" class houseboat, boasted a cocktail bar, a spa, full air-conditioning, and 24/7 radio access to Home Base should they need help or advice. We decided that we'd made the trip in a Shackboat.

While Lo and I were marvelling at the egregious luxury of this floating McMansion a car screeched to a halt near the bottom of the launching ramp beside us and honked and waved at the passing houseboat. It changed course and nosed into a strip of beach on the other side of the ramp to us, and as it did so a power-dressed young woman in high heels made her way towards it, followed by a young bloke toting a very large suitcase. Apparently she'd been too late to make the start. As the houseboat neared the shore it came to a halt on the shelving sand, leaving about three metres of water between it and the shoreline. As we watched to see if she was up to taking off her shoes and wading out to it there was a low whirring sound from the houseboat and a gangplank appeared from the bow, slowly growing outwards like a huge erection, till it rested on the sand. The guy strode up it and deposited her suitcase on the front deck, then returned to the car and drove off. She shilly-shallied on the sand for a bit, then plucked up the courage to walk the plank onto the boat, which immediately backed off, retracted its gangplank and continued on its way downriver. Can't have our executive classes getting their feet wet.



While they were loading the latecomer several more houseboats came by. One was definitely more interesting than all the fancy new ones – it was an old-fashioned paddle-wheeler, and had the home port of some little town up the Campaspe River – goodness only knows if it seriously could have sailed down from there as the Campaspe isn't exactly huge. Anyway, there were quite a

few people on it, seeming as if they were having a good time. But about half an hour later, just on dark we saw it coming back down the river, and it seemed more to be drifting, and it pulled in on the opposite bank just upstream of where we were. One bloke managed to get ashore, and he had a rope and was looking for somewhere on the steep bank to tie the rope to. It was clear they were having difficulties with the motor, and after much ado, still unable to find a suitable log or other fixed item to tie the raft onto, the bloke (and his small dog) got back onto the boat, and they gradually drifted back out into the main current. I was a bit worried that since we were on the outside of the bend they might drift across and hit us – it would have made mincemeat of a small raft like ours. But no, the paddle-wheeler stayed drifting down the middle of the river, completely disabled.



One of the fishing boats returned just as the paddle-wheeler drifted past the launching ramp near us and he went over and tried to tow it, but he was using a long rope and his little tinnie didn't have enough guts to bring it back against the current. Anyway the fisherman gave up and let the rope go and came ashore, and the people on the paddle-wheeler seemed happy to just go on drifting down the river. It was pretty dark by this stage, and they were drifting towards the main part of town, which had lots of houseboats and other craft and structures lining the shore.

About 9:30, we were just getting ready for bed – all the wakeboarders and fisherpersons had returned and taken their boats ashore, and then another bloke came down to launch his speedboat. By torchlight. It was pitch dark. He then asked if we had seen a disabled boat drift by and we told him it had gone by an hour ago. So off he went at high speed, with the strong light beaming out the front to light the way. Then about an hour later another car came down to launch a boat – this time it was an older bloke with a runabout. He just had a small torch. He asked if we had seen the drifting boat, and we explained when it drifted by. He took off down the river in his tinnie – also at high speed, with only his small torch to light his way.

We dozed back off again only to be woken by what appeared to be a crowd of people having a party on the launching ramp. Two or three cars had arrived, and people were drinking, laughing and shouting. There was one older woman among them, and I worked out from what I could overhear that she was the wife of the bloke who went out in the tinnie to try and repair the paddle-wheeler mo-

tor. And the rest of the party were her kids and their friends who had adjourned here from the usual Friday night gathering at the pub. After about an hour, much jollity, and a couple of mobile phone calls, they apparently decided that the houseboat repairer wasn't going to re-appear that night and about 1am they all dawdled off. I tell you, it's a happening thing in Echuca on a Friday night!

The next morning we were up at dawn, as we had to pack up everything in the raft that Lo hadn't already done the day before while I was getting the car and work out what to leave in it in storage and what to take. My major responsibility was to empty the Porta Potti again. We knew there was a public toilet at the Tourist Information Centre, so I loaded the PP into the back of the X-trail and drove down there. The Information Centre is relatively new, and rather ritzy. The men's loo down the side had already been cleaned by the time I got there about 8am (it said so on a little roster thing on the door), and it was spotless. Well, for a while. After I had had another go at getting the PP contents into the toilet bowl I somehow managed to get shit all over the place again. It looked like a drunken chef had staggered in and tripped up with an oven dish full of gravy. After a few tonnes of toilet paper and countless flushes I managed to get it looking reasonable again, all the time expecting that someone would come in and spring me at my noisome task. There's clearly a knack to emptying a Porta Potti without mishap, but I'm not sure I want to do the necessary practise to become proficient.

I got back to the raft to find that Lo had pretty well organised the packing up, and after we had a cup of coffee we gave a Roy a ring and he was down in no time. He must have been able to tell by looking at me that backing a trailer wasn't my long suit, and he jumped into the X-Trail and trundled backwards down the ramp while we untied and pushed the raft out into the stream. I waded in and held it steady while he backed the trailer under it. It floated onto the trailer easily, (blessedly, there was hardly any wind for once) and we winched it up into position. Roy eased it up the ramp and parked it on the flat at the top, then went home again while Lo and I collapsed the roof and unlashed the polypipe pontoons. This took us about two hours, and when we were finished we rang Roy again. He came back with an ordinary 6x4 box trailer, and somehow we managed to manhandle the outriggers and polypipes up onto it, where we lashed them precariously in place. It was about a 3km drive to Roy's caravan storage yard, and almost before we knew it we had the main trailer parked and the outriggers propped up next to it, ready to swelter through the rest of the Riverina summer. Without Roy taking over most of the heavy lifting we'd never have been able to do all this on our own. He was terrific.



So it was with something of a sense of anti-climax that we drove into Echuca to have some lunch. The first leg of our Murray trip was over.

When we got back to Cooranbong I took the outboard motor to the people we'd bought it from and had them service it. When I went to pick it up I presented them with the bill from Stokesy in Cobram for getting it to go into forward gear. I could hardly believe it when they dug their heels in and said they wouldn't refund the money under warranty. After having phoned them and cleared it when we were down there! I stood my ground and insisted that the Service Manager phone Suzuki about the matter while I waited. I felt a certain satisfaction when, after a 20-minute conversation they told him to pay up. He was mightily pissed off that he hadn't prevailed in the stoush, so for good measure I let him have it about The Matter of the Shear Pin while I was at it, and walked out feeling somewhat vindicated. It had taken an hour of unnecessary and vitriolic dispute – all for a lousy 48 bucks.

EPILOGUE

We got back home and I went to my appointment with the urologist whose specialty was prostate cancer. Unfortunately, he didn't manage to show up and after a two-hour wait I was counselled by a junior resident. After seeing two more specialists I ended up opting for monthly hormone injections to try to throttle its progress, as none of the surgeons we spoke to were keen to operate because of its aggressiveness. Some of the main side-effects of hormone therapy include hot flushes, distressingly-increased portliness, a set of man-boobs that would make Dolly Parton feel challenged, and the gradual loss of muscle-tone. Over the ensuing months, as I found how little it took to exhaust me physically, I became less and less enamoured of the idea of returning to the Murray to embark on another leg. I just didn't have the strength any more to rise to the challenges that a trip like that would inevitably pose. I felt pretty wimpy when I discussed this with Lorraine, because I knew how much she wanted to go back and do more, but the more I thought about it the more I concluded that it would be irresponsible. What's more Lo's tendency to be easily fatigued because of her polymyalgia had worsened over the twelve months since we'd been on the river. So we ended up deciding, reluctantly, that the exigencies of life had caught up with us, and that more Murray mayhem wasn't a goer. We decided to drive down to Echuca to bring the raft back to Lo's place, put it in the water at the mouth of Dora Creek again, bring it up the river and moor it at the bottom of her garden, and try to sell it after we'd had a bit more use out of it over the coming summer.

It was almost twelve months to the week from when we mothballed the raft at Echuca to when we took off to bring the big trailer back with the main shelter structure on it. For reasons that continue to elude me, (apart from the obvious explanation of conniving and greed on the part of legions of men in suits), the Australian price of petrol had skyrocketed because hurricane Katrina had hit New Orleans a month or two previously, and the 2000km round trip to Echuca cost a motza just in fuel – like somewhere around the \$300 mark – let alone motel and food bills. When we got back to Echuca we had a guy come over to Roy's storage yard and give us a quote on how much it would cost us to get the outriggers and polypipe pontoons freighted up by truck, rather than go back again and get them ourselves. He wanted \$700 to get them from Echuca to their depot in south-western Sydney, from where we'd have to pick them up. We declined what we considered to be an inflated offer, and decided to come back in a couple of weeks with Keith-next-door's boat trailer and take them back ourselves. This was to prove to be a decision with considerable unforeseeable ramifications.

We were pleased at how well the raft seemed to have weathered the best part of a year exposed to the Riverina elements. Roy was a tower of strength helping us get the big trailer hitched up, doing minor repairs to make the tail-lights and indicators work, pumping up the tyres, and greasing the nipples in the wheel hubs. We left Echuca soon after lunchtime, and with an overnight stop at Gundagai we were home again with our cumbersome load by about 4pm the next day.

I must admit we both felt the trailer was a bit inclined to swing rather too readily in the later stages of the journey back home, and we even stopped at one stage to check that we did not have a flat tyre. And when Bill was trying to back it in through the back gate, he got into more trouble than Rodney Adler because of

his chronically stiff neck and he couldn't turn his head round far enough to see where he was going. The gate is only a few inches wider than the trailer, so it has to be lined up at a perfect right angle to back the trailer in, as any slight diagonal increases the width of the trailer, and it doesn't fit through the gateway. Anyway, after about 6 frustrating attempts he asked me to try and back the thing in. Backing big trailers is not one of my long suits, but I was prepared to give it a try, and eventually the trailer was in the back yard, but at a very jaunty angle. It seemed to have a mind of its own where it was going to go, and finally ended up wedged between the willow tree and the old septic tank pump.

We were walking up to the house tired but happy, when I noticed that one of the



trailer's wheels was on a decidedly odd angle. When I got under to have a closer look it was all too plain that there was only air where the bearings should be. It looked exactly like the wheel on our camper trailer when it chewed up all of its bearings when we were in the karri forests of southwestern Australia. How long it had been running in this condition we had no idea, but I was glad that we hadn't discovered the problem when we were

on the way back, as nobody in their right mind would have continued driving with it in the condition it was in, and we would have been marooned somewhere while we had it fixed. As it was, the bearingless hub was of ancient vintage, and no easily-buyable replacement hubs would fit. It took the local mechanic from Cooranbong a week to source the correct parts and get the wheel turning again. And another \$140.

Two weeks later we hitched up Keith-next-door's trailer to the X-Trail and took off for Echuca again to get the rest of the raft. We stayed overnight (Friday) at Lockhart in the MIA, a bit south west of Wagga, and we were on the road again reasonably early on the Saturday. At 8:30 I'd just turned onto the Newell Highway from the road to Urana when the X-Trail's clutch decided to die. I couldn't get in or out of gear. Lo and I looked at each other, wondering what to do next. We both raced through the same train of thought: when I'd bought the X-Trail new three and a bit years ago I'd let my NRMA Road Service membership lapse, because Nissan gave you the same service for nothing while the car is under warranty. Notice I just said 'three *and a bit* years'? Yep, we were just a bit out of warranty, which meant we had no one to turn to for road service or towing.

Happily, there was mobile phone reception where we'd stopped. (It turned out to be better than the reception in Jerilderie, which was 8kms away). I phoned NRMA, explained our situation, and asked if they could let me have the phone number of a local towing service so I could ring them and arrange to be towed into Jerilderie. They "weren't allowed to give that to non-members". I pointed out that we were completely stranded, and in the end she gave me the number of the only tow truck in Jerilderie, who was also the local NRMA depot. I rang them, and an acerbic bloke there said he couldn't tow me in unless I joined the NRMA. Exasperatedly I rang the NRMA again and joined up. It cost \$271 and the girl dealing with me said that she'd call Jerilderie now that we were members and tell them to come and get us, and that they'd be there within the hour.



After an hour and three quarters I rang the Jerilderie depot again to check that the NRMA had indeed contacted them. A woman took my call, confirmed that the NRMA had called, and said that they couldn't come at the moment because there was another car being fixed. Her manner was extremely curt and unfriendly. At ten-thirty the tow truck finally arrived and the driver (also curt and unfriendly) duly towed us the 8kms into the depot. When we asked how long it would take to get us back on the road he calmly announced (he seemed to enjoy it) that he couldn't possibly look at the car for at least three weeks. With considerable dismay on our part, and further discussion, he suggested we try the other mechanic in town. We walked down there, but he was short staffed, and couldn't look at it, so he suggested another bloke who lived locally but had a servo in the next town. We walked around to his place. He was away for the weekend.

One of the people we spoke to advised us that we'd be best to get the car towed to the closest Nissan dealer, which was at Cobram, 80kms away, and get them to fix it for us. Back we went to Curt and Unfriendly at the NRMA depot, where I said that since he'd towed us to a place (his) that was unable to get us back on the road, would he tow us to Cobram so we could get it fixed there? No way. Too busy. We'd have to organise it ourselves. He'd done his job, and fulfilled his NRMA obligations. More than a little taken aback by this spectacular display of bucolic unhelpfulness we realised that C&U for some reason had taken a dislike to the cut of our jib and that the only place we'd get with him was nowhere.

So we rang the Nissan Dealer in Cobram and told them of our predicament. He could look at it sometime on Tuesday he said, and gave us the number of the Cobram RACV depot who would come up and tow us back down. And who do you think the Cobram RACV bloke was? None other than Jimmy Stokes, the bloke that Big Ben had sent me to a year ago to get the outboard motor on the raft going forward again. Yes, he could send a bloke up on Monday morning, but

he wouldn't be able to bring the trailer as well... and it would cost \$250. When you're over a barrel you're in a prime position to get fucked, and I had a strong suspicion that our situation was being exploited, but anything was better than C&U. Furthermore, there were no other options.

We were both at a loss to explain the curmudgeonly demeanour of C&U, but thinking about it, I suspect that running a country NRMA depot for years, he may have developed a hearty disdain for people who don't join the NRMA until they have a breakdown and then expect all the stops to be pulled out to help them. Even though I'd been a member of the NRMA for over 35 years until a few years ago, with a 60% No Claim Bonus, we would have appeared to them to be just that sort of people, even though my non-membership was the result of oversight rather than design. But he wasn't interested in subtle distinctions – he just wanted to give full vent to his prejudices.

I booked us into a motel at the back of a pub near where the car was. It was appalling - nothing worked and it was hot and noisy, nowhere to sit except on the bed, The air conditioning (after I eventually got them to come and get it going for us) sounded like an approaching train, and the television was in perpetual snowstorm mode for all but Channel Ten. Jerilderie was a shit of a place. We decided they still have a chip on their shoulder from Ned Kelly holding them up 130 years ago. Next morning we took our gear and trudged up to the other motel a few blocks away. It was a bit more comfortable. The only food available in town was appalling junk food.



Anyway, Monday morning the bloke arrived from Cobram with a car trailer, and loaded the car up. As soon as she twigged that we were going to have to leave the trailer behind, the sour wife of the Jerilderie NRMA man took pleasure in assuring us that they could not take responsibility for it, and that anyone might steal it - it was out in the open etc. I felt it was a veiled threat, and it wasn't even our trailer. So when we got to Cobram, we immediately hired a car and headed back to Jerilderie to get the trailer. (And who was the only bloke in town we could hire a car from? None other than Jimmy Stokes - the helpful man who will get you out of trouble, but sure knows how to charge.) The car was a Ford Falcon wagon, about 20 years old, with 286000 km on the clock, with many features not working. It cost us \$95 a day, with 100 km allowance, and 20 cents a km after that! And a \$5000 excess if we dinged it! The car wasn't even worth

that much. But at least we got the trailer before it disappeared. (And we didn't ding the car.)

I'd phoned ahead to the Cobram Tourist Information Centre and booked us some accommodation, stating that it needed to be close to town as we couldn't walk far - but when we got there we found they had booked us into an on-site unit three kilometres out of town. So I had to cancel that, and we got into a motel at the end of the main street. At least it had a microwave so we could cook some food ourselves, after three days of junk food. But they were booked out for the next night so we had to go to another motel about a kilometre out of town. It had no restaurant and no cooking facilities, so I bought a tin of salmon and some bread to make sandwiches for dinner. All the while we were waiting for the car to be fixed the only thing to do each day in town was to have long cups of coffee in coffee shops, pace up and down the main street until we got too tired, and then sit in the motel room and watch TV. We both only had one change of clothes with us as we'd planned to be away only a couple of nights.

Being marooned in various motel rooms for most of the week was made even more depressing by the ubiquitous news bulletins which were, for us, incredibly dispiriting. We were regularly exposed on the hour to hyped-up accounts of Australia going down the gurgler. I wept to see some of our most precious and hard-won social achievements obliterated. Police, military and ASIO powers were strengthened to the point where Habeus Corpus and the presumption of innocence are now just a joke, and the legislative machinery of a police state was trundled into place while the last vestiges of the union movement were being neutered. The international conspiracy of guys in suits was making huge inroads into the quality of the lives of all those who don't go to work in suits, with the latter apparently unaware of what was being done to them. Not a pretty sight.

Bill was getting increasingly dispirited. Sitting around doing nothing is not an occupation he tackles with relish. We couldn't go to the local library, as it was at the TAFE college, a few km out of town. I at least was able to distract myself with a book of 250 Sudokus that I got at the local newsagent. Then on the Wednesday, as if Bill wasn't dispirited enough, the Nissan place phoned to say that the fly wheel was stuffed as well as the clutch so the repair bill, instead of being about \$1000, had now skyrocketed to \$3650. We were not impressed. On top of that there was an extra five nights accommodation and food, as well as the towing and car hire! We totted up that we'd see little change out of \$5000.



Anyway, they finally got the car fixed at lunchtime on Thursday. Then we drove the 125 km to Echuca, and had a cup of tea with Roy and Kay. We went out to start loading the pontoons up, to find that it was very muddy all around the area where it was stored because there'd been local flooding from heavy rain and storms a couple of days earlier. We'd just got the first bit half on when the heavens opened again with a hail storm! That departed after a while and we continued loading - getting a bit wet with passing showers, but we figured if we didn't continue loading then it would be even muddier under foot. Fortunately Roy was strong enough to do a lot of the lifting with me helping (Bill has lost most of his muscle bulk and strength with his treatment, and anyway his arthralgia doesn't let him do much). We finally got it all loaded, and headed back as far as Rutherglen, where we spent the night. Then we headed back home on Friday, glad to be heading home, and assuming all our troubles were over.

We had a bit of lunch at Gundagai, and then half way between Yass and Goulburn we had a blow out on the front passenger wheel of the car! Where it happened was not an easy place to stop, and to stop suddenly from 100kph with the big load on the trailer was a bit dicey. We were on the edge of the Expressway, just over a crest, partially blocking the left lane with B-Doubles roaring past, horns blaring angrily at us! We managed to unpack the bits and pieces from back of the car to get out the spare (including the fridge, which lives there) and change the wheel without anyone ramming into us. Then into Goulburn to several tyre places to try to get a new tyre - but no luck. The X-Trail has an unusual tyre size - of course. The last place we went to actually bothered to have a look at the wheel and found that the inner tube - (which had been put in a fortnight ago, when Bill had two flat tyres in less than a week) - had blown to shreds, but that the tyre was probably still OK. So they put another inner tube in it, and sent us



on our way, with the spare tyre still on, and the damaged one as a spare. (I know you supposedly get more flat tyres in the last stages of a tyre's life, but these tyres are quite new!) Fortunately that delayed us enough that we hit Campbelltown at 5:45pm, which meant that we were going against most of the peak hour traffic, although the traffic

was still very heavy, and towing a trailer all across Sydney with the 6 metre polypipes and raft outriggers was a bit of a nightmare. I worked out the car and trailer were over 40 feet long. It was like driving a semi-trailer. Anyway, after a week of disasters we made it home late Friday night.

We left Keith-next-door's trailer with pontoons and outriggers still on it just outside the gate at the bottom of Lo's back yard, on the public reserve which is notable for its beautiful tall eucalypts. The following Tuesday we had a severe windstorm, and a big branch as thick as your thigh sheared off right close to the trunk from high up, fell just inside the back fence, fell outwards, demolished

the fence, then fell heavily onto the front fork of Keith-next-door's trailer. The main trunk of the branch, still a good 150mm in diameter, landed a direct hit on the winding lever of the brand-new jockey wheel we'd bought for Keith's trailer, while the rest of the leafy part and smaller branches were splattered all across the pontoons and outriggers. (If I were more of a believer I think by now I'd be beginning to think that some Omnipotence or other was sending me portents of doom. What the fuck else can go wrong?) As it turned out, there was no damage to anything, apart from the jockey wheel now having a permanent list to port – unless, of course, some as-yet-unknown legacy from this incident comes back to plague us at some time in the future. These days we're prepared for anything. As the T-shirt says: "Shit Happens". It sure does.



A couple of days after the branch incident Kent and his son Jambo came over and we took the trailers down to Dora Creek launching ramp where Kent and Jambo attached the polypipe hulls to the outriggers with very flash high-tech stainless steel tightenable bands. I was a bit sorry to see the rope lashings go nonetheless – after all, they were about the only bit of the whole enterprise that were at all redolent of Huck Finn-type technology, the romantic inspiration for the whole project.



I've been an avid recycler ever since I became environmentally aware, and we tried to incorporate as much recycled stuff as we could into the raft. But I have to say that most of the second-hand stuff we used in the raft was a bit of a mixed blessing. The cat hulls were the most spectacular instance of re-use being not necessarily the best way to go. Keith-next-door's gas stove, donated gratis to the enterprise, had cost us \$78 to get to work, and we'd had to go as far as Raymond Terrace to find someone who would refurbish it. For that we got some use out of it during the trial runs around Dora Creek, but that was all. I used my elderly battery-charger to charge up the batteries when we were bugging about trying to make the electric motor a goer and it lead to the farce on our last trial on Dora Creek where we had to paddle for several kilometres because the batteries had not been as fully charged as the charger assured us they were. The big trailer was recycled, and the wheel on it that chewed up all the bearings was positively ancient – so much so that a new hub wasn't anywhere to be found. The list goes on.

But on the other hand, the new stuff we bought specially for the project had its problems as well. The X-Trail was only just out of warranty when it did the clutch and flywheel. The new outboard motor had the gear-engagement problem. The gadget we bought to extend the range of the mobile phone didn't work worth a damn. Lo's laptop let us down – the battery chose that particular time to die. The sweep oar was brand new, but turned out to be not sturdy enough – an old oar would have been better. And that list goes on too.

If we were to do it all over again, would investing in a satellite phone and a GPS have made any difference? It's hard to say. Sometimes I think such technology would remove pretty much all the danger from an adventure like we had - but a lot of the excitement as well – (though I have to admit that I've always enjoyed danger and excitement most when they're over). Would we do it all again if our health allowed it? I think we probably would – though that's easier to say sitting here warm and sheltered than it would be if we were being wrecked, stormed on, shat on, and under small arms fire all over again. In many ways the trip was a contrast between the Huck Finn romantic ideal that started it all off and the raw reality of the experience itself. But on the other hand: if all those unforeseen events and unfortunate mishaps hadn't happened, I don't suppose we'd have bothered writing about it. In retrospect, the experience was very much the richer because of all the unexpected things that happened.

Mind you, currently I'm considering getting quotes from an exorcist (would you believe we heard an Anglican minister interviewed on the radio on the way home from Goulburn who still does that sort of thing) to try to shoo the evil spirits out of their hiding places on the raft. I haven't seriously considered abandoning my hard-won atheism to become a Born Again because of all the omens and portents of doom that have been visited on us by an obviously vengeful God, but I am thinking of approaching some of our Seventh Day Adventist neighbours here in Cooranbong to pray for us – just in case. And I must admit that I'm quite enjoying attending the monthly meetings of the Morisset Chapter of Club SOL-ACE – the Survivors Of Lamentable And Crappy Events.

Post script: *We brought the raft back home intending to sell it – if anyone would want to buy such an eccentric item. But once it was back on Dora Creek and chugging along nicely we stopped seeing its sale as an urgent matter. We moor it at a jetty at the bottom of my garden, so we only have to walk 50 metres to get on board. Everything we want is on board, and if we want to go out for the day or a couple of days, all we have to take down is the food we need. Pretty cool eh? So instead of selling it, we have given it a new lease of life as a floating pavilion, and we often take visitors out for the day on beautiful Dora Creek. Not too many snags to worry about – and those snags that are there we know intimately now anyway. So the dream of drifting all the way down the Murray may have floundered, but at least we did 300 kilometres of it, and we can enjoy our raft without having to venture so far from home.*







