

Cape Crusaders – Part 5

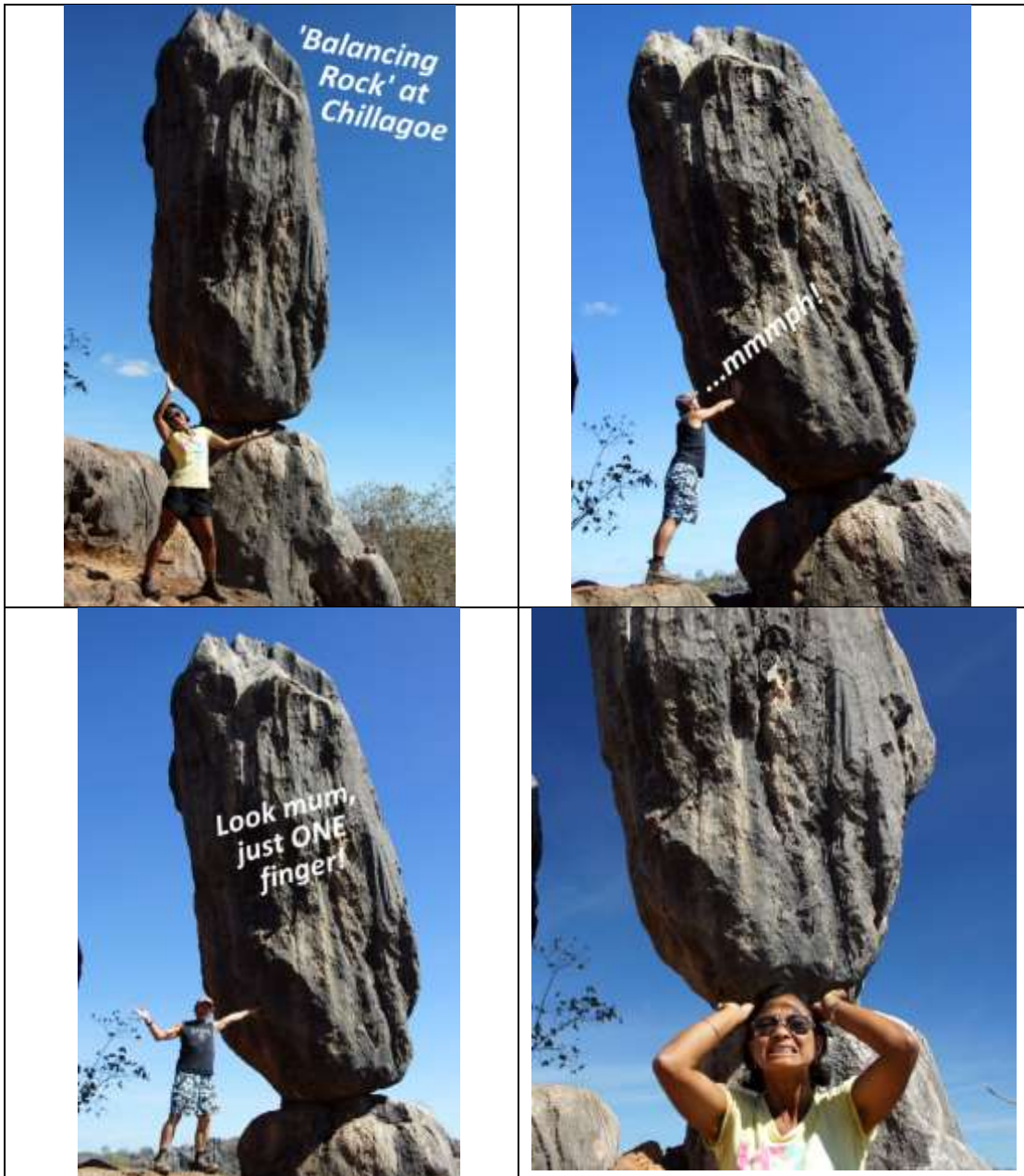
Frid Aug 4/2017 – 7611km (4,756miles) on the road

The Walsh River lies 30km to the West of **Chillagoe** which marks the end of the Burke Developmental Road. A mysterious world of grand underground caverns and exquisite limestone formations are found here. We take guided tours to explore **Royal Arch**, **Donna Cave** and **Trezkinn Cave**. We spot ancient marine fossils, bats and Huntsman spiders. Guano (bat droppings) provide foods for cave cockroaches which in turn are preyed on by the spiders. Pythons with heat sensing equipment snatch bats mid-flight in total darkness. A whole cave eco-system at work here!



All in the eyes of the beholder

Jagged limestone outcrop at Chillagoe Caves National Park



'Balancing Rock' at Chillagoe

...mmmmph!

Look mum, just ONE finger!

Crazy Chillagoe 'Balancing Rock' begs for silly pics!

Next up a little further East is **Mareeba**, part of the Atherton Tablelands. What catches our attention is the upcoming famous **Mareeba Rodeo**. All along this trip we wanted to attend such an event but always were either too early or just missed one. So here is our chance!

The experience is well beyond what we imagine – on opening night QLD and NSW (*'State Of Origin'*) are fighting it out with NSW winning - despite a scarce few of us in the support crowd!

Various competitions include riding disciplines *Bare Back, Open Saddle Bronc, Trick, Bull Riding, Steer Wrestling and Breakaway Roping* – we city slickers are thoroughly gobsmacked by the show.

The horsemanship is an absolute delight to watch and the animal control staggering; right down to the rodeo clowns whose job it is to distract raging bulls from attacking their riders after they get violently thrown off and they inevitably ALWAYS do!

Bare Back and Bull Riding is positively not for the faint-hearted. The ambulance van pulls into the arena numerous times with competitors seemingly “down and out” but each time they manage to stand to their feet to the roar of the crowd. Code of conduct seems to be, one must walk off unaided and so they do – many of them hobbling, limping or bent over.

They do breed them tough out here! – Who are these testosterone types? – Certainly there must be some serious bruise nursing happening in the aftermath - We are in awe...!



Saddle Bronc Riding – tough sport for the hardened





Bull Riding – not for the faint of heart!





*Rider
thrown*

*Rodeo clowns
distract bull*



Close shave

Steer Wrestling – show of strength - man vs beast





Breakaway Roping contest – amazing skills





Rider 1 lines up hind legs



Rider 1 gets the job done



Beast safe & secured

And there is more: *Trick Riding – Michaila on ‘Phantom’*



A third generation South African family grow coffee near Mareeba against the odds. Their fight for survival against the odds is an amazing success story – and they do make a good brew there!

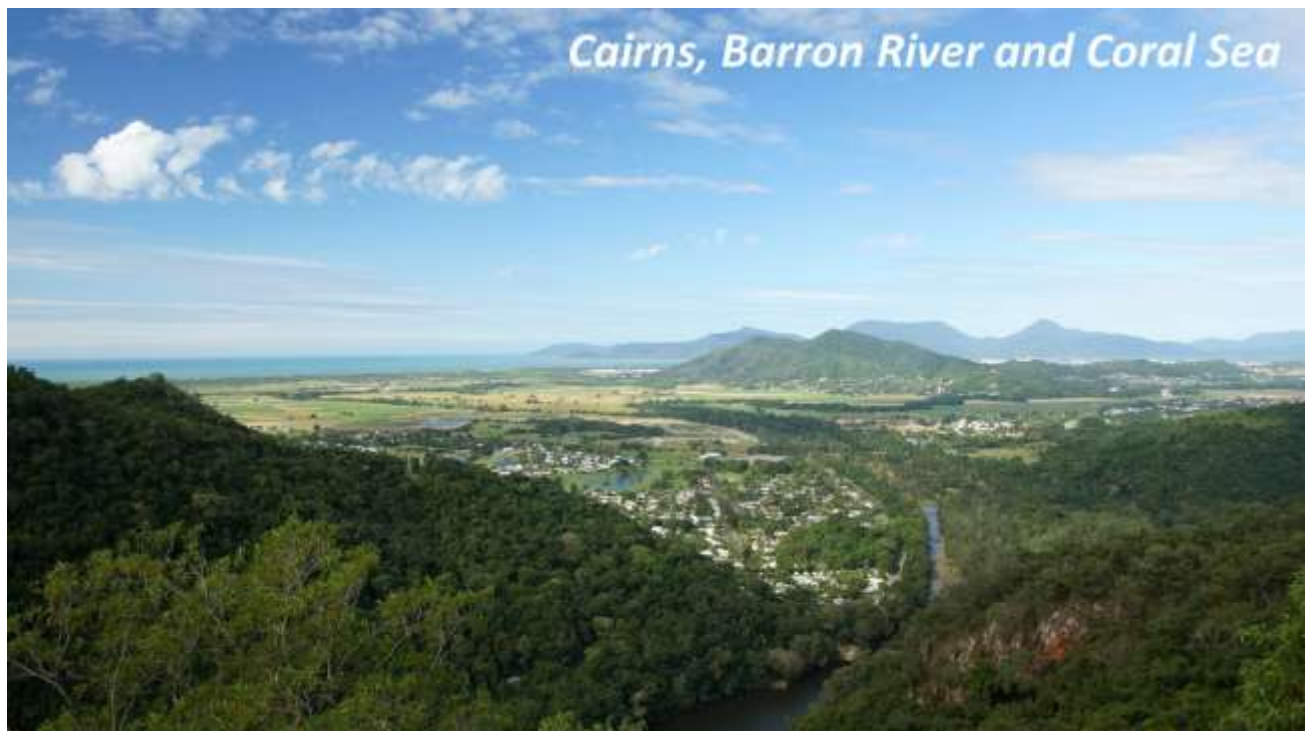


I chip one of my front teeth flossing; a prompt investigation of the local dental (technician) scene reveals the best dentist in town: He swiftly repairs my tooth with confidence and my smile is restored to perfection.



While waiting for the dentist appointment we have a day to spare so duck into Cairns which is only an hour's drive away from Mareeba. We pick up an additional solar panel and some wheel ramps before catching a ride on the **Skyrail**: A (ski resort type) gondola which travels many miles over the world's most ancient, million-year-old rain forest from sea-level Cairns to the quaint mountain village of Kuranda revealing the breathtaking scenery of this World Heritage site and Barron Gorge National Park. On the side we learn from staff, the privately owned SkyTrain operation cost \$36million to

set up and was paid for after the first year of operation. It has been running for 22 years non-stop – the clever duck who birthed the idea would be living rather comfortably one imagines 😊



Heading North we cross the Daintree River (near Mossman) by ferry aiming for **Cape Tribulation**. From bulldust to rain forest is a stark contrast to say the least. At "Cape Trib", as it is known amongst locals, *'rainforest meets the reef'*. What an incredibly diverse country we live in!

The Wet Tropics' botanically unique rainforests contain the most complete and diverse living record of land plants: A 400million year old history. Many ancient rainforest species shelter here: Home to the rare tree kangaroo and moody Cassowaries. These birds can be aggressive and are best avoided. The middle toe of their three-toed feet is a straight kicking dagger which can kill!

Daintree river crossing into Cape Tribulation National Park



Cape Trib



Cape Tribulation Beach



Mangrove jungle





There are two ways forward to Cooktown from Cape Tribulation: The **Bloomfield Track** (104km) or 'the long way round' **via Mt. Molloy and Lakeland** (320km). Logic suggests choosing the shorter distance, but the *Bloomfield* is a much more serious **4WD-only** route.

Answers by locals about the current condition of the track vary from "you would never tow anything along there, you'd be mad" to "it's only another dirt road". Apart from the news that ten days prior someone killed himself and seriously wounded his wife when his rig lost brakes, shot down a 30degree descent over a bend, got airborne and hit a tree four meters above ground level.

Needless to say such report plays havoc on one's mind: The only solution to assess the *Bloomfield* is to first drive the track without the van. The windy route leads through thick rainforest across two mountain ranges – 32km in all. We manage one hour and fifteen minutes to track's end at Wujal Wujal aboriginal settlement and the same again back to Cape Trib.

Decision made: The situation is quite manageable - we tow our Matrix over the *Bloomfield* the next morning – though in 'low-range' gear - all the way.



Our trusty Landcruiser “eats it up with ease”, barely even touching the brakes on the 30degree descents. In low range this vehicle turns into an animal that wants to climb trees although one can't be in a hurry: It is very slow going – often crawling at walking pace in first (low) gear.

As not to hold anyone up we enter the *Bloomfield* at 7am to avoid traffic both following and oncoming (it was very busy the day before). The track has some seriously narrow sections and hairpin bends that could prove major challenges in traffic. For this reason there are ‘radio call points’ to warn oncoming uphill traffic (they would need to give way!) before entering the steepest sections.





By 9.30am we arrive at the historic Helenvale "*Lions Den Hotel*" – breathing some sigh of relief. Should it be mentioned, we did say a prayer before setting off that morning?!



Lion attack at the Den

We stay for the day and camp that night on the edge Annan River behind the *L.D. Hotel*. Band '*Dog Gone South*' plays the Blues at the Den that night. Katherine charms a fellow traveller to turn wheel- into rocking chair on the dance floor!



Band 'Dog Gone South' rocks the Blues at Lions Den



Lions Den Blues dancers



Lions Den Hotel rules



Typical Australian Pub enlightenment for patrons

Cooktown is only 40min up the road from here. There we catch up with dear friends Byron and Annie and enjoy the comforts of civilization (staying in a caravan park, doing the laundry, dining out and stocking up for the Cape).



***Black Mountain
South of Cooktown***



Camp Matrix and Camp Cullen matriarchs meet at Cooktown



One of the places I hold fond memories of is **Archer Point**. Twenty nine years ago I camped there with friends Paul, Tom and Andy (from Germany) on a windsurfing mission. It blew 50 knots day-in, day-out back then; so sailing was out of the question. I dearly wanted to show Katherine this place as she wasn't with us in those days. Indeed, we revisit the beach we camped at. Archer Point is in good form again: It is blowing a gale and the famous photo 'flying a shirt' on that concrete platform, where once stood a lighthouse before a cyclone blew it over many decades ago, had to be reshot for memories sake!

Howling 35 knots:





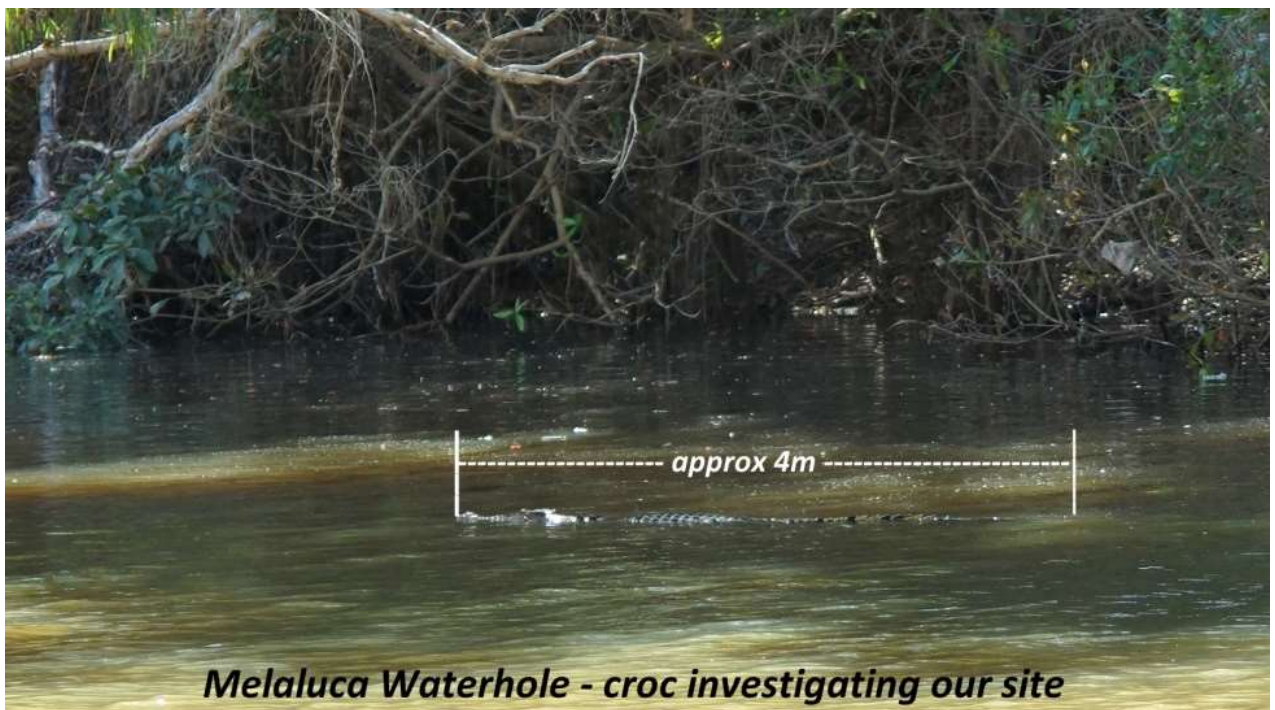


With Byron and Annie we visit the Coloured Sands at Elim Beach near Hopevale, North of Cooktown. There is a camp ground on this idyllic beach.



With food, fuel and beer stocks replenished for the hike "off-grid" into Lakefield National Park at the foot of Cape York we finally enter this iconic part of Australia.

Melaleuca Waterhole is the first halt (site No.1). Here we spot our first “saltie” on the far side of the river. An hour later he briefly pops up in front of our camp but I never get a shot of him. I sit in wait for a VERY long time! While wondering how long a croc can hold its breath, a completely unexpected drama suddenly unfolds before my very eyes (fortunately I have my 400mm lens in hand to take footage): A King Hornet tumbles down from the tree I sit under, wrestling a Huntsman spider to the ground. The battle is brief, the Huntsman fatally dispatched by multiple hornet’s stings and dragged off under a paperbark flap of same tree. I assume, the hornet will lay her eggs inside the spider’s carcass where next generation hornet larvae will hatch and eat out the spider’s body from the inside – **albeit the darn croc I wait for never shows up again!**



The croc I wanted to photograph up close but got ‘hornet drama’ instead

King Hornet wrestles Huntsman spider out of tree



The struggle is over in seconds...



King hornet delivers fatal sting to Huntsman



...taking no prisoners



*Hornet drags off spider to final burial ground
under bark of tree*



Other wildlife at Melaleuca: One morning our van is covered in frog tracks. It seems, poor fella frog didn't get much traction on the bulldust layer, judging by the slide marks. He settles into Katherine's chair for the night instead.

She decides NOT to kiss him, reckons that would make one prince too many! I feel greatly relieved...



Further on **Hann's Crossing** (site 14) turns out "best so far".





A little while after this shot was taken a 12foot saltwater croc swims by right under our noses in torch light – What an unforgettable sight!

Our try for Barramundi produces a catfish catch instead. These are well suited for fish cakes or a curry dish. We used to throw catfish back until someone educated us for the better!



We do our best avoiding the crocs even when retrieving our cray pots (with aid of a very long bamboo pole!). At Hann's a 12footer "saltie" saltwater dinosaur swims by right underneath the rock platform we are fishing off in pitch black night. His eyes light up bright orange under the torch.

Worth mentioning: The rock face we are standing on has a 2 ½ metre (8ft) vertical drop off to the river surface – therefore no danger becoming part of the food chain!

In the mean time we have developed the 'perfect camp fire' – so it goes:





With Katherine in camp there is never a shortage of a fine meal.

Cooking on the open fire is part and parcel of the outdoor experience for us!

And fire gazing afterwards under the stars over a Port or a cuppa with Gingernut cookies ☺☺☺



We move on to **Kalpovar...**

Here we meet couple Dennis and Jenny. They have been coming here for 13 years and know the area inside out. They even have names for all the crocs in the area. Some of which they watched growing into serious contenders. We bush-bash on foot with the aid of Dennis' GPS to find a hidden Billabong some 45minutes into the jungle. The Barra aren't biting bar one which Jenny hooks but the best part is observing the crocs sneaking up on us. They are easy to spot as they leave a bubble trail which every now and then bursts into a "spritzer effect" on the surface like the evervescent of a poured soft drink. We hear a great deal about the bush that day on our excursion with them – part of the enjoyment of travel: Meet your fellow travellers, listen and learn!



The termite mounds are getting taller at Lakefield NP



Bee Eater



*Whitebreasted Sea Eagle -
Kalpower - Lakefield NP*

Coming up... pushing North to the tip...

Watch this space... more soon!



"TheNotSoGrey Go-Mads"

***Greetings from
Chris and Katherine***