

Spaceward Bound Australia-Plus Day 8 & 9 (Karratha to Manilya Roadhouse to Shark Bay)

Day 8 was planned to be another relatively easy day of driving from Karratha, with all the team heading straight to our final stop apart from one group that needed to go via a mine site (Mesa A) to take a range of clay samples. Indeed all was going well until our late morning refuelling stop at Fortescue, when one of the Landcruisers opted out and decided it really didn't feel like doing any more driving.

After assessing the situation, it was discovered that the source of the problem was the alternator. Initial thoughts were that this was going to make a rather bad day, but it was discovered that it was actually one of the retaining bolts and not the whole unit. After discovering that remote service stations don't have tools, or spare parts a decision was made to find a non-essential bolt from another point in the engine bay-which proved more difficult and time consuming than anticipated, it also begged the question-why aren't all the bolts the same size and the same length?



(Above) It's got life in it, just not as we know it (Captain 'Larry Lemke' Kirk during fuel stop repairs).

From here it was a quick fix using 'bush mechanics' skills and then trying to get the vehicle to start-after using a range of battery sources including packs from some of the scientific instruments being carried. Eventually Plan B went out the window and we considered options further down the alphabet. The Toyota Prado was brought over and a jump-starting procedure began to occur. It was at about this time that we were considering the 'Houston we've had a problem' call to Chris McKay and getting them to relay a 'Mission-control' solution of jump starting a 4WD, with a non-functional alternator, after only finding parts to fix it from its own

engine bay, with minimal tools and keeping power usage to a bare minimum. After turning all electrical items off, checking the charge rate and waiting a little more time, eventually it turned over and stayed running-back on the road. Well on the road for most of us, the decision was made to wait for a recovery crew from the rental car company (who had been called earlier) to check the vehicle or possibly even provide a replacement.



(Above) What's the difference between a Mars Exploration Rover and a rental 4WD-a Mars Rover has no problem in powering up after refuelling!

For the crew that hit the road, we pulled into Manilya Roadhouse, about 140 km short of Carnarvon for our evening stop. Tent-city here we come again.

Day 9 started easier enough after a relaxing evening of red wine and watching an excellent documentary set in New Mexico by our own expedition member, Daniel Valerio called 'Land, Water, People, Time'.

After getting on the road at our usual 9 am plus 30, the convoy headed for Shark Bay, not before driving through Carnarvon, a coastal community of around 5,000 people famous for its bananas and the NASA Tracking Station that was set up in the 1960's for the Gemini program and used well into the Apollo era. In fact, the first ever live broadcast into Western Australia came through Carnarvon via Honeysuckle Creek via the Sea of Tranquillity- the Apollo 11 moon landing!



(Above) The OTC Carnarvon Station-the main dish from the Gemini and Apollo era is visible on the left.

The Carnarvon Centre was run by the Australian Overseas Telecommunications Commission (OTC) throughout those years and well after the NASA pull-out in 1975 and still had involvement in international space missions through JAXA and the ESA, with missions such as Giotto to Halley's Comet, before the installation was decommissioned in 1987. Yet another space connection for Spaceward Bound.

To think that mid-December last year this entire region was devastated by floods, with peaks around 15m after record-breaking rainfalls, including houses and other buildings being washed away, we didn't see much evidence for this, although rural communities are well known for their resilience and pitching in when the going gets tough.

After some further driving we pulled into Shark Bay mid-afternoon, enough time to have a look around and take a tour through the Ocean Park Aquarium at Shark Bay.



(Above) Feeding time at Ocean Park Aquarium

After a private tour with our group, seeing a range in local fishes, sharks and other exotic Indian Ocean life we headed towards our overnight accommodation at Carbla Station.



(Above) Hungry locals- I guess it's not called Shark Bay for nothing!

This time no need for tents, we had the luxury of 'Shearer's Quarters', which meant more time to discuss, propose concepts of stromatolite growth, plan tomorrow's adventures and sitting around the campfire... nothing like the full station experience.