

# VHC Dec 15-Jan 16 trip Highlights

Dec 27 – Jan 5

## Day 1 – Dec 27

The majority of the group met at Mt Osmond truck stop on time at 7:30am on 27<sup>th</sup> Dec and departed in convoy. This group comprised of the trip leader, Di and David Delaney (D-Cubed) driving our JKU Rubicon and towing a Star Vision hard floor camper, Steve and Cate Burt (BG's) in the Landcruiser Sahara towing a Challenger soft floor camper and Cathy and David Davies (Catdav) in a Grand Cherokee and towing a pop top camper van. We then radioed as we approached Crafers and Wiert Oosterom and Lorraine Harrison (Silver) merged seamlessly into the convoy from the onramp driving an XJ Cherokee with an Avan caravan behind. Only half an hour in I received a phone call from my son to inform us that I had become a grandfather an hour earlier with the birth of William Scott Delaney. After receiving congratulations from the others and agonising about returning home we decided to continue leading the trip as only I knew details of the overnight location. Some refuelled at Keith after stopping at the Bakery for morning tea. We continued on, stopping at Horsham for lunch and then taking the less travelled route to Bendigo which turned out to be a very picturesque route and finally to a free camping spot called Dargile Campground several km north of Heathcote.

## Day 2 – Dec 28

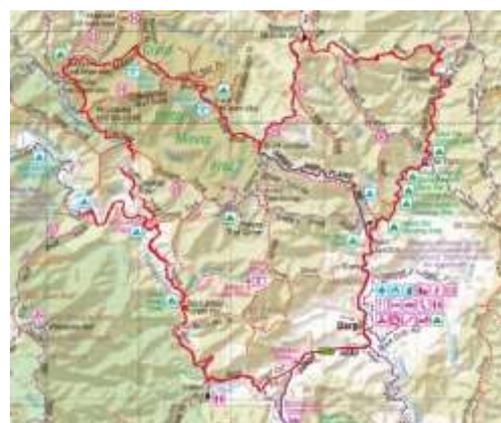
We set off at 8.30am but stopped in Heathcote so Catdav could buy some more meat as they had had refrigeration issues overnight. The rest of us found a coffee shop and waited in the shade. We then travelled south onto the Hume Highway in an attempt to skirt around Melbourne. With only 1 missed turn the satnav re-calculated and we eventually emerged onto the Monash Highway (M1) and followed it east to Sale and then turned north towards Dargo. We decided to try for camping spots on the Wonnangatta River but first found Black Snake Creek campsite full so continued on over Kingwill bridge to an eventual wooded location just past the base of Billy Goat Bluff track right on the river but with no amenities. We established camp there for the duration.

## Day 3 – Dec 29

Distance 116km

4WD tracks: Wonnangatta Rd, Crooked River Trk, McMillans Rd, Grant Trk, Grant Rd, Dargo High Plains Rd, Downey Rd, Upper Dargo Rd, Dargo High Plains Rd, Dargo Rd, Short Cut Rd, Crooked River Rd, Wonnangatta Rd.

We decided a sleep-in was in order as the planned drive was not to be too long or difficult so we agreed to head off at 10am but eventually started moving at 10:30am after the ranger had stopped by with her take on conditions and our obligations. We travelled back to Kingwill Bridge but took the water crossing option instead and turned towards Talbotville. This was a busy track with many oncoming vehicles encountered in narrow sections with a cliff wall on 1 side and a drop to the river on the other. After 6 water crossings and a gate and an hours driving we reached Talbotville where most were pleased and relieved to use the toilet. After a short break we headed for the ruins at Grant before turning north briefly on the bitumen. After 8km we reached the turnoff east near Mt Ewen and headed along what I thought would be a sedate road but Downey Rd turned out to be a descent equal to any that would follow on the trip; needing 1<sup>st</sup> gear low to make the long, controlled descent. We stopped for lunch at Black Flat Camping Area before heading to Dargo and the obligatory beer at the hotel. A leisurely drive back to camp and we settled in with a dip in the river, dinner and an evening campfire with the largest marshmallows anyone in the group had ever seen (bought at Costco).



4WD tracks: Wonnangatta Rd, Crooked River Trk, South Basalt Knob Trk, Basalt Knob Trk, North Basalt Knob Trk, Blue Rag Range Trk, Dargo High Plains Rd, Great Alpine Rd, Dargo High Plains Rd, Dargo Rd, Short Cut Rd, Crooked River Rd, Wonnangatta Rd.



Camping where we were meant a repeat of the morning before; but leaving at 8:30am, to travel to Talbotville (and an obligatory constitutional). It was a beautiful and warm day with dry conditions. We set off after a short break. Firstly a couple of river crossings then a very steep ascent over rocky outcrops up the spur of South Basalt to the ridge top which undulated easily for many kilometres. Eventually we could see the Blue Rag Range and climbed up and around Basalt Knob itself (1512m) until finally crossing the spur to Blue Rag and climbing to the trig point (1718m) and had lunch. From here we could see across the vast valleys and ranges to the Pinnacles to the south and Mount Hotham (1868m) to the north and after lunch decide to drive to the ski resort for those who hadn't been before. After a brief rest and look around (it didn't take long) we retraced our steps back to the Blue Rag turnoff and continued the length of the Dargo High Plains Rd to Dargo where we refuelled. We also found out from a notice on the board of the Dargo Store that one track we planned on doing, Haunted Stream, had been closed due to deterioration of the track and required an alternate. I had had reservations about the distance we would need to cover to complete a loop in 1 day and the information at Talbotville about the many river crossing on Crooked River seemed a close by option. We all headed back to camp and another dip in the river.



## Day 5 – Dec 31

Distance: 61km

4WD tracks: Wonnangatta Rd, Billy Goat Bluff Trk, Pinnacles Rd, Castle Hill Trk, Junction Spur Trk, Scrubby Creek Trk, Crooked River Rd, Wonnangatta Rd.

The next iconic track to attempt was Billy Goat Bluff up to the Pinnacles (1445m). It was another dry, sunny and very warm morning. We set off about 10am as we thought it would be a short day and as we were camped nearby we were soon on the climb and immediately we hit the steepest section after a tight couple of switch back turns. It was rocky but firm and the climb was pretty relentless (1100m up in 8000m distance) but well worth it. Once at the carpark it was a short walk to the top to the fire spotter's tower and 360° panoramic views.

The journey back down was very picturesque too driving through tall timber with some very steep descents and surprisingly ascents as well as we climbed up nearly to the top of Castle Hill after crossing the saddle from the top of Mt Valencia. We continued the drop to the river where we stopped for lunch. We then crossed the river and headed back to camp for a relaxing afternoon in the river. Those with Telstra mobiles could get reception at camp so some catching up was done and also the forecast was able to be displayed. It showed potential thunderstorms later the next day.

Being New Year's Eve we all resolved to see it past midnight and to do this we thought we would nominate midnight to be 11pm our local time. This was dashed when our neighbours, a young couple from Melbourne came and joined us and being from a polite generation we all stayed up and saw in the new year.



## Day 6 – Jan 1

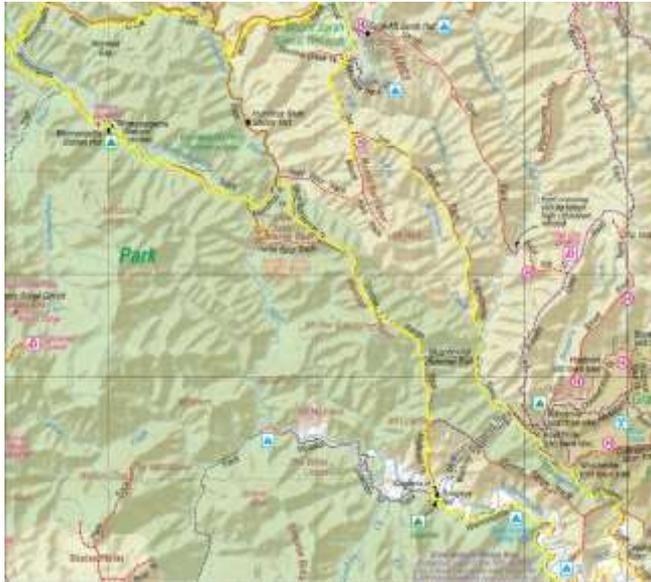
Distance: 0km

Rest Day

We arose late after NY celebrations to a sun filled sky and a warm day. Due to the impending forecasted weather and the rest day Catdav decided it would be an opportunity to leave before bad weather and make their way home in time to greet their daughter returning from England. After saying farewell the rest of us all hung around camp and tried our best to keep the fridges running with solar panels and generators because with no driving there was no recharging of the vehicle auxiliary batteries. We swam in the river and soaked up the serenity with fellow campers and recounted our tracks and experiences so far with them.

4WD tracks: Wonnangatta Rd, Eaglevale Trk, Cynthia Range Trk, Wombat Range Trk, Humffray River Trk, Wonnangatta Trk, Rileys Creek Trk, Water Spur Trk, Tea Tree Range Rd, Tea Tree Range Trk, Racecourse Trk, Crooked River Trk, Wonnangatta Rd.

We awoke relatively early on this planned trip day. The weather was still good and forecast for low 30's. There had been some thunder and lightning overnight and several small fires had started north of Dargo and in Wonnangatta. We set off and had an early pit stop at Eaglevale before crossing the river and making the ascent up the spur to Mt Cynthia, along the top of the range where we encountered some fog patches and along Wombat Spur to descend into Wonnangatta Valley. We lunched near the homestead ruins and yards under some massive English evergreens.



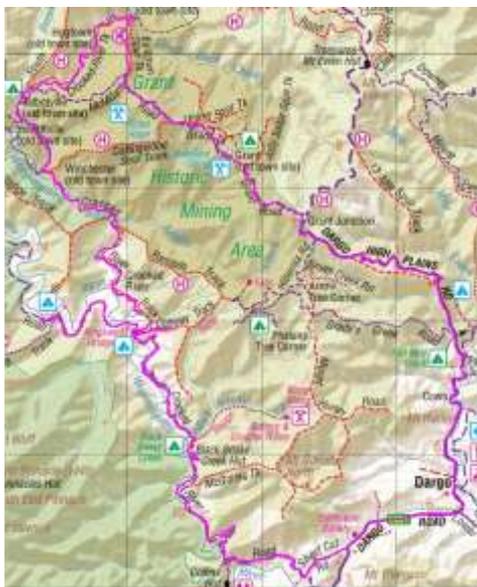
Whilst there we noticed helicopters and planes flying nearby and circling us and soon we spotted smoke through an opening in the trees. A bushfire was burning less than 2 km from our lunch spot but the light wind was blowing away from us and it looked pretty much contained by the water bombers. We decided to continue with our planned tracks and we drove north within half a km of the fires which were across a large open area on the other side of the river and up the slopes of that hill.

The tracks were enjoyable

and mainly straight forward except for a steep section near the top of Water Spur Trk which took Silver a second attempt to get over some larger rocks. We stopped at the top near Mt Sarah (1553m) and took in the fantastic views. We then descended into fog for a while during the drive back towards Talbotville and along creek and river beds back to camp.



It rained that evening so we ate under cover and adjourned into the BG's tent for a bit of warmth and friendly conversation and drink. Discussions lead us to conclude that if the wet weather persisted we would rethink our departure date depending on what transpired the next day.



4WD tracks: Wonnangatta Rd, Crooked River Trk, Conway Trk, Crooked River Trk, Bulltown Spur Trk, McMillan Rd, Grant Rd, Dargo High Plains Rd, Dargo Rd, Short Cut Rd, Crooked River Rd, Wonnangatta Rd.

We had all agreed that Crooked River would be a satisfactory alternative to Haunted Stream and we headed off on a damp morning along the familiar route to Talbotville. After crossing the Kingwill Bridge we opted to take a side track up Conway Trk and down Randall Trk rather than stay in the valley for the third time. The first 2 vehicles made it up a rocky section but left mud behind which meant tail-end Charlie couldn't make it up the bigger steps and resigned to reversing until safe and returning to the river. We followed as well and reconvened to travel to Talbotville in convoy once more.

Shortly after we were stopped by activity on a bend where in the wet conditions a 4wd had slid off the side of the track on a sharp bend and rolled down an embankment. They had

already cut a track into the bush to reach the vehicle and felled the tree it was held up by with a chainsaw when we stopped to help. The driver was uninjured and said they would be a while so we should continue. We reached Talbotville for a brief stop without incident in the wet to find it had stopped raining and the sun was shining.



We then embarked along the river for another dozen or more river crossings and past numerous fenced mine shafts until we reached Stonewall old town site and started the steep and rocky climb up the spur which to our surprise and relief was dry. Once at the top and back on the road to Grant we thought it would be straightforward but it was quite wet and some clay sections were very slippery so it was with some caution but also several slides on corners that we made it to the bitumen and drove into Dargo for a hot pie and sauce lunch which some were lucky to purchase before they ran out. We drove back to camp along the usual route and passed the convoy with the dented fourby in the group heading out in the opposite direction some 4 hours after we had first encountered them. At camp we resolved to depart the next day as it was going to continue to be wet for the next couple of days.

#### Day 9 – Jan 4

We rose early to pack up in the drizzle and broke camp about 9:00am. We travelled in convoy along the wet tracks out towards the highway for the first time on the trip. We stopped at the junction of Short Cut Rd to farewell Silver who was going to visit friends in Hamilton on the way back to SA. BG's and D-Cubed were towing the campers north along the Dargo High Plains Rd in the wet, slippery and white-out conditions to avoid having to travel back through Melbourne traffic and planned to stop at some wineries in the King Valley before returning to Adelaide.

This trip was another phenomenal experience with a wide variety of 4wd driving experiences, great company, mainly good weather and spectacular scenery and lots of rivers to cross and a great river to camp next to for 7 nights. We negotiated the iconic tracks that we all wanted to experience and found each one to be unique and worthwhile. Everyone's bucket lists contained a few additional ticks after this great shared adventure.

Camping spots were abundant and still free for our 7 nights in VHC (and 1 near Heathcote) and campfires were allowed all year round; except on days of severe fire danger.