

A diamond in the dust



A charming township in the heart of the Queensland outback captured the heart of **Janice Stringer** as she enjoyed a family road trip...



Travelling in a black Ford Falcon with my husband and our two children, spending three months touring around Australia was certainly turning out to be the right thing to do. We were making our way along the Flinders Highway, but with dusk beckoning we decided to rest for the night in Julia Creek, a small township in McKinlay Shire, in the outback of Queensland.

We knew we had to stay here the night or we would get caught out driving in the dark again, something we had already experienced on the outskirts of Camooweal, which led to a close encounter with a dead kangaroo getting jammed under the car's front spoiler, due to the night flies that continuously committed hara-kiri in front of our eyes. Breath holding had certainly become an art for us by the time we had limped into town.

As we looked through the railings, we could see baby wallabies bouncing around

Our first impression of the place was one of deserted cleanliness. Taking our time to drive around this little town we noticed two stores either side of the road, a fire station, even a little hospital as you made your way out of it. Looking around for the best place to stay in our budget, we eventually decided to stop at the Julia Creek Motel for the night, which was situated just on the right as you drove into town.

CREATURE COMFORTS

Driving up to the main entrance, we parked the car, stretched our legs and perused the property that we were standing on. Directly in front of us was a curve of motel rooms, each with an individual parking space.



Out the front of each room were a patio table and two chairs. Our room was comfy and clean, and perfect for us all to collapse. After parking our car, we decided to explore our new surroundings and made our way over to the clear blue swimming pool, which had caught our eye. After the dry heat of the highway, it sparkled at us like a diamond dropped in shingle.

A perimeter fence encased the swimming pool area and as we looked through the railings, we could see baby wallabies bouncing around on the grass. Entering carefully, we introduced ourselves to these adorable creatures and Donna, our host, brought out their milk so that we could all have a go at feeding them.

She informed us that they were orphans, which she took in when their mums were found dead. Donna showed us the joey pouches that they had made out of hessian sacks, so that at nighttimes the joeys could sleep within a comforting interior.

I watched my children sit on the grass, with bottles in hand, feeding the joeys as they listened to the stories that Donna told them about where the little >>

Top A dazzling sunset bathes the Queensland outback with its rich, golden glow

Above Bottles in hand, the children have a go at feeding a couple of the cute baby wallabies



animals came from and felt the awe and wonder of being a parent, knowing that this was such a special experience for two English kids. In only a short period of time we began to feel that we could reside in this town forever, which surprised us. Four English poms in Julia Creek miles from nowhere; I thought I always wanted to live by the sea, not outback Australia!

FRIENDLY LOCALS

Popping along to the local Town and Country club for a Sunday evening dinner, our eyes devoured the home cooked roast, spaghetti bolognese and chips on offer.

After a well-cooked meal, and some good conversation with some of the locals, shared with a VB stubby, we spent the evening with the co-owner of the Julia Creek Motel, Warwick. With laptop in hand he shared with us photographs of the wet season in the outback, and we poured over photographs of strikingly beautiful thunderstorms and flora and fauna.

Making our way back by torchlight to the motel was scary and exciting in our English minds, as we thought about all the Aussie critters that could cross

our path, yet none appeared. The morning churned out another sun-baked day as we took to the glistening pool, revelling in our exclusivity of it, until Cody, Donna and Warwick's son, joined us after school for some family fun.

After, we sat on the sundeck and chatted with Donna and her friend about life in Julia Creek. Listening to the tales of the events in the area, such as the Dirt 'n Dust Festival, the Julia Creek Races and the Rodeo; we realised that there was so much to do in a place that initially seemed so quiet.

There was the possibility of a visit to Walkabout Creek Hotel, made famous by the *Crocodile Dundee* films, or a self-drive tour of Red Claw Farm, even an afternoon walk along the Julia Creek Nature trail.

We realised that there was so much to do in a place that initially seemed so quiet

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Later that day we fired up the barbie, charring the steaks as we watched the most striking sunset develop around us. Once the sun had gone completely and the moon had been given a respectful amount of time to rise, my daughter and I made our way along the shingle track from the motel to stargaze. Within a short space of time, we were far enough away for the lights of the motel to have dimmed significantly.

Turning off the torch we both turned our sights to the heavens, in all its twinkling glory. Our eyes adjusting to the scene before us, we could see the curve of the earth around us, as we looked upwards to the heavens, then followed all of the stars back down to the edge of the ground. So close, it seemed that we could reach out to them and join them up dot-to-dot with our fingers.

A quietness descended upon my daughter and me, as we reverently absorbed what we were experiencing. Afterwards, we walked back towards the motel, after standing for what seemed like ages. Our footsteps crunching on the stony ground was the only sound, as the sight had hushed us completely, yet at the same time, we couldn't wait to share with my husband and son our discovery.

This was our last night in Julia Creek and although we hadn't 'done' a lot in the traditional sense, what we had done was spend time with hospitable, warm and welcoming Aussie folk who shared with us their lifestyles, lives and outback hospitality, a memory we will all treasure forever. 🇦🇺

Top The family enjoyed the trip of a lifetime touring around Australia in their car

Above The Stringers enjoyed a warm and friendly welcome at the Julia Creek Motel

■ If you have a holiday story you would like to share with *Australia and New Zealand* magazine please email your words and pictures to editor@australiamagazine.co.uk