



Leaving Port Pirie, South Australia's city of dreaming lead smelter stacks, to cross the wet stuff beyond (photographs by John Clark)

ALICE SPRINGS MICRO SAFARI

John Clark reports on an Australian gliding safari with a difference – visiting Maralinga, the site of nuclear testing in the 50s and 60s

FOR some time I have been thinking of putting my wife up for a Kitty Wills award “For services to gliding and glider pilots above and beyond, etc...” In 1938, over the Easter holiday, Kitty drove 1,280 miles towing a glider trailer in something like a Standard Vanguard.

In the past decade, my wife Geraldine (AKA the Princess) has driven of tens of thousands of miles towing a trailer through Australia's outback and made the annual gliding safaris of a small group of us possible. Unlike Kitty, the Princess was in a modern

four-wheel drive and wasn't towing a old glider trailer, but she was travelling in remote areas, often on roads with less than one car an hour and most of the time, without phone signals. So perhaps she does deserve an award.

Of course, there's a danger that an award of any sort alerts the recipient to the fact that what they are doing is out of the ordinary and they decide to stop, so I put the award idea on hold for a while.

Our safari in 2016 was one of the less arduous. We'd set out for Alice Springs,

perhaps a 5,000km round trip by road, but only made it to Clare Valley in the wine growing region of South Australia, about half way. Over a series of relaxed dinners, and there were many since the weather was unusually bad, one of the other pilots was pushing the idea that the Princess get a CRM114, which was either a gadget from Dr Strangelove or a very expensive French turboprop aircraft. Over the course of the safari, the idea of a 'noisy' aeroplane in which she could to some extent experience the joys of remote area flying was planted.

The Princess is more than usually suspicious of aircraft, especially those which make noise, but the idea of a touring motor glider with wings big enough to slow its plummet from the skies should the noise stop, and with fuel consumption enough to satisfy a greenie such as herself, seemed to be acceptable.

One of the carrots was that we could travel together and go to places which were too far for gliding safaris, such as Alice Springs and Ayers Rock. The former mid-week manager at Lake Keepit Gliding Club, Ian Downes, had gone to Alice with his wife, leaving Lasham's Val Phillips in control. As a result of frequent misprints and helpful corrections by me to his newsletter manager's reports, Ian had dropped in on the Princess and I at a remarkably early hour at an outback motel during the last safari while he was on the way to set up house in Alice, so payback or revenge was in order.

The initial idea, inspired by the film *Steelyard Blues*, was an elephant poo drop on their house. Falling faecal matter doesn't seem to be illegal, but the baggage restrictions in the Ximango made this unlikely. However, another idea presented itself.

Hands up anyone who remembers Maralinga? Maralinga was established in the 50s as Britain's main nuclear testing site on Australia's mainland. After a series of atmospheric tests and further experiments, in 1967 Maralinga was cleaned up and handed back to its traditional owners leaving more than 22 kilograms of plutonium lying on the ground.

While looking at a possible route to Alice for the gliding safari, I had discovered that tours were being done at Maralinga. It's a place which has always fascinated me, but it's so far away from anywhere that if you were going anywhere close, you'd have to take the tour... wouldn't you? It looked like the perfect place to get a house warming

present for a friend.

"So m'sieur, are you going to give the safaristi a blow-by-blow, day-by-day account?" Bated breath... (smoked salmon for lunch).

It's long been a tradition that I do an email account of the trip for the Lake Keepit club newsgroup. The initial idea behind it was to try and encourage more people to try this form of adventure soaring, but the emails have now got a life of their own.

And so we embarked on our safari. We made reasonable time to Cobar, New South Wales, for refuelling... reasonable based on the traditional safari headwind. The next leg was a bit touch and go. I'm not used to looking at some computer thingy and having it say that you'll be in the circuit at such and such a time and then actually being there.

It's fascinating to fly so easily over places where you have suffered... and I guess most safarians have places on the road to Broken Hill where we have suffered, from the swamps of despair near Nygan to the cliffs of insanity towards Broken Hill.

We made Broken Hill about 15 minutes before sunset, tied down and went to the Princess Suite as usual. The forecast for the next day was a bit confusing, but the winds were forecast to drop towards the west.

At one point during the flight, Geraldine asked whether we were across the border and then panicked... she had three uneaten mandarins. She was nearly arrested for interstate transportation of illegal avocados one year and, even though we were at 6,000ft, the mandarins had to be eaten before we crossed into South Australia.

More of a problem was the peel. Being an relentless greenie, she would not throw the peel over the side, and left that up to me. There then followed a big argument about what would happen if a piece of peel fell on a horsie, somewhere near... well, near nowhere in particular.

We had strong headwinds that day and made slow progress westwards. It's long been known that the prevailing winds are from west to east and the meteorologists involved in the bomb tests were concerned to make sure that radioactive plumes did not drift downwind over prominent population centres, so it was either Brisbane or Adelaide which got clobbered.

We flew into light rain and heard a



Above: These straggly plants are all that has re-grown around ground zero. A few kilometres away, there are moderately tall trees. The ground was turned to a sheet of green glass which was scraped off in one of the many clean-ups leaving just the attractive lumps which remain... as the ideal house warming present?

Below: perfect for experiencing the joys of remote area flying



I'M NOT USED TO LOOKING AT SOME COMPUTER THINGY AND HAVING IT SAY THAT YOU'LL BE IN THE CIRCUIT AT SUCH AND SUCH A TIME AND THEN ACTUALLY BEING THERE



Geraldine Clark during the tour, which is limited to the site of the major blasts

■ The tour... well, it started at 9:30 and ran until about 4:30 and there was never a dull moment. Robin, who is 99 per cent of Maralinga Tours and seemed to know almost everything about Maralinga, didn't attempt to politicise the tour. He just took us around, told the stories and let us make up our own minds. From my later reading, he was never factually wrong.

The British nuclear tests don't reflect well on anyone apart from the wretched servicemen, who had to slave away in 45 degree heat to build the place. And it was men. No woman was allowed to put a foot on the ground.

It wasn't just the British. Menzies, the Australian PM, gave the British permission to do the testing on the basis of a 15-minute phone call... and didn't tell parliament for another three months. The tests were held first in the Abrollos Islands, then at Emu Field some 400km north of Maralinga, which was deemed to be too remote.

After the nuclear test ban treaty, the major tests stopped and only minor trials were carried out. These, however, were more polluting than any of the major blasts. Surprisingly, the radiation from a nuclear explosion does not last particularly long... certainly nowhere near as long as the radioactivity from elements such as plutonium and uranium, which have a half life of 25,000 to 4.1 billion years.

The British wanted to know what might happen in the event of a nuclear accident where a truck or a plane carrying nuclear materials crashed. The

so-called minor trials involved 'Broken Arrow' experiments, such as wrapping plutonium with dynamite and wood to see what happens if you set fire to it and then blow it up. And that was how 22 kilograms of raw plutonium were spread around Maralinga.

It's possible that the local aborigines never lived at Maralinga, but they certainly moved through regularly. It was the responsibility of the sole Native Patrol Officer to clear them from the area before the tests... his patrol area stretched from Kalgoorlie to Parkes – about the same as Paris to New York.

There are many stories, discounted by the authorities then and now, of a serviceman discovering a group of aborigines camping in a crater just days after it had been formed by a nuclear blast a hundred metres or so above.

The land has been given back to its traditional owners, but they won't return. They believe it's been poisoned and maybe it still is. The area of the tour is limited to the site of the major blasts. We didn't visit the sites of minor trials.

Nobody appears to have been sick at Maralinga apart from one person, who was treated with milk and iodine for food poisoning... but then the hospital records were lost. Even later, none of the often mysterious illnesses and deaths of the servicemen who worked there were, according to the various governments, due to radiation exposure although the NZ government seem to count four times as many odd cases as other governments.



✈ report on the radio about strong winds on the ground, 25 gusting to 35. No mention of knots, or kilometres, or location. I had a close look at two airstrips, but they were narrow dirt strips with a strong crosswind and I doubted my – and the Ximango's – ability to cope so we aimed for Port Pirie, which has three cross runways, and landed straight into a benign six knots.

We talked to the pilot of a Flying Doctor Kingair at Port Pirie, South Australia's lead poisoning capital, who had glowing reports about the tour at Maralinga though he said he would not go there if the wind was very strong.

The leg from Port Pirie across the water to Whyalla was brilliant. We don't get to glide enough over the sea! The gap is pretty narrow and, at the climb rate of the Ximango, within glide angle back from the middle. We landed at Ceduna around lunchtime and, after refuelling, we had lunch by the sea in town and were fairly quickly back in the air.

The first third of the leg to Maralinga is over billiard-table-flat farmland at the edge of the Nullarbor. Beyond that, the terrain changes to strange and uncomfortable striated ridges, covered by scrub in a giraffe skin pattern. I presumed that these were remnants of old sand hills but perhaps, bearing in mind the direction of the ridges, they were caused by one of the Maralinga blasts? Beyond this, things fairly abruptly changed to a more typical flat, treeless plain.

We were flying pretty much into the sun, which meant we could not enjoy any glow from the terrain. When the single strip loomed up, it was a bit of a surprise. Not only far bigger than I had imagined – it's supposedly cleared as a space shuttle emergency strip – but also nicely bitumened (back in 1956). And, according to locals, never repaired since.

We had been asked to 'buzz the village' and because the Rotax is not as loud as a Lycoming, we went over at about 300ft, which P2 thought was a thousand feet too low. The strip was so long that I started the final leg over the piano keys and still managed to get lost after touchdown, looking for the taxiway.

The tour guide, Robin, had been waiting two hours or so (the phone reception is patchy!) in case he missed the plane. We tied down to some heritage concrete blocks which had been used to tie down one of six Mustangs which were placed in the path of the blasts to see how they fared. The



aircraft were recovered some years later, decontaminated, and apparently most are flying today in the USA.

Now, I don't usually organise anything more complicated than dinner so it was not a complete surprise to discover that catering is strictly 'bring your own' at Maralinga. One of us had not read this on the website and told the other one and, regrettably, the emergency muesli bars and nuts were left in the Ximango, a 6km walk away in the dark... although there's no real dark around here what with one thing and another. In fact, they generate power by pointing solar panel like things at the ground rather than the sky!

Both of us can lose a few kgs and we're not strangers to an alcohol-free night, even if never on safaris. Being one of the stolen generation (English boarding school) and growing up with rationing, I am no stranger to starvation either, unlike Geraldine who grew up in a time of plenty and a land of plenty. However, it is me who was panicking. The nearest shop is four hours away by road!

Priscilla, Queen of the (Maralinga) Desert, the wife of the caretaker, came to our rescue with a box of food. Of course, everything out here is deep frozen and most 'food' that's deep frozen isn't. In fact, real food was talked about and things were looking quite good until Geraldine mentioned the V word. I would have gratefully downed a chop or two, but once the vegetarian word escapes, it's misery all around.

Things took a turn for the worst after 'dinner'. Our daughter, Zoe, sent me a text message along with a picture. The phone coverage out there is so slow that in the 10 minutes it took to download the picture, I discussed with the Princess whether Zoe's news might be that she'd got a new kitten to replace the 'needy' one she gave away, but no. She was expecting a baby of a different

kind. This caused the Princess to go into a major panic, saying she would not be allowed to hold a baby if she came back all radioactive.

We woke, part hungry, to the eerie glow that's Maralinga in the pre-dawn, clutching our stomachs, and got ready for the tour. I did not think this would be an important part of the culture of my people, but it turned out to be a chapter of shame for both the UK and Australia.

After the tour, back in our donga, the Princess made some excuse about getting up early the next day and had a decontamination shower. I resisted a little and had a nervous one shortly afterwards with a good scrub. If we'd had more than one set of clothes, we probably would have burned our old ones!

The following day, we set off northwards to Cadney Homestead, which is a roadhouse on the Stuart Highway serving Avgas, Mogas, and bacon and egg rolls (of which we ate a few). Most of the terrain we flew over was quite daunting and some of the most 'interesting' I'd seen. I'd bought two books on Maralinga before setting off, but decided not to read them just in case the facts put me off doing the tour. Now I was sufficiently disturbed that I had to.

And a souvenir house warming present? To tell the truth for once, when we visited the site of one of the low air-burst bombs where the sand had melted into glass I could have picked up a few lumps, but was by that stage almost too nervous to breath the air, let alone stir up any dust! We settled on a few layers of melted glass from an observation post, which had melted while being burned during the 'clean up' of 1967. It proved to be sufficiently convincing that the recipient would not touch it and I assume it's still glowing away on the kitchen table in Alice.

Above left: That's not an airstrip, THIS is an airstrip. The Princess authorised me to land there, considering the size

Above right: caption to go in here please aption to go in here please aption to go in here please

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WE WOKE TO THE EERIE GLOW THAT'S MARALINGA IN THE PRE-DAWN AND GOT READY FOR THE TOUR



John Clark was transported to Australia in the late '60s, where he discovered the sun, sailing, surfing and hang-gliding. After 30 years of flexwings he moved over to sailplanes and has about 550 hours, 450 of which are on his DG-808C. John says he chose to learn to glide at Lake Keepit because it is surrounded by good outlanding opportunities