



Client Bulletin May 2025

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For the 5 regular readers, my mum, and the sprinkling of assorted insomnia sufferers who read this column, you may recall that last month I was planning a road trip to western Queensland. Through a miracle of coincidence and divine benevolence the area of my planned excursion had just received record levels of rainfall.

Nevertheless, I was keen to visit our many motel and caravan park clients out west, and to spend a bit of time reacquainting myself with regional economies and demand drivers. The opportunity to drop in a few business cards and hopefully gain some new clients will not be lost on the agents and reps who ply these territories.

4,000 kilometres and 21 nights later what have I learned?

Let's start with mother nature. The west can be a pretty depressing place in drought with much dust, distressed livestock, wildlife risking life and limb to graze beside highways, and many dry creek beds. On the other hand, after record rains, it's amazing. Creeks and rivers in flood, dams full, spectacular vistas reminiscent of an African Savanna landscape during the wet season, healthy livestock, and near zero roadkill.

I had plenty of time to reflect on the amazing conditions while sitting on the highway between Roma and Injune waiting for flooding levels to fall and the police to give the all clear. I had spent the previous night in a Darling Downs motel and was booked into a cabin at the Big 4 park at Carnarvon Gorge for the following 3 nights. The park managers had already phoned me and warned that the journey might take longer than expected, and so it turned out to be. The delayed travellers now queued up on highway A7 were made up mostly of road trains and high clearance 4x4's. For those of you unfamiliar with trucking in the outback, a road train typically consists of a prime mover and 3 trailers. Average total length 55-60 metres and can weigh more than 130 ton depending on cargo. A lot of fun when overtaking, albeit the drivers are usually super courteous and will signal when it's safe to pass - always check of course, coz you never know when a psychopath might be driving one.

Needless to say with time to kill, the *If It's Flooded Forget It* mantra sprung to mind. Do the same rules apply to a 130 ton road train as a 1240 kg Corolla. I didn't need to wait long for an answer. The local coppers turned up on the other side of the water where it appeared just as many heavy vehicles were waiting. I should point out that prior to arrival of the law, some trucks and 4x4's had crossed safely and the water was dropping fast. Being the risk averse cautious person that I am, I waited.....should have sat behind the last road train going through but as always, hindsight is a wonderful thing.

For the next 2 hours we waited while being advised by travellers on the other side that the water level needed to be low enough for the bloke in said Corolla to get through. Our CB communications also informed us that the coppers had told everyone that fines would be issued to anyone who entered the water from either side before a formal clearance was given. If this isn't the best example of lowest common denominator that I've seen, I don't know what is. We must walk as slow as our slowest person, and it would seem drive that way as well.

As you would expect, when we finally got the go ahead the Corolla driver's popularity was clear to see. But here's the thing. It's not his fault. The blame for these idiotic one liner, one size fits all mantra-based rules lie squarely with the bureaucracy. We can't be bothered differentiating risk across a broad range of variables, and we don't trust the punters to have a brain, so a one size fits all policy will suffice. Same goes for the 60 km/h roadworks signs on open highways when no roadworks are in progress coz it's the weekend. I could go on but I'm sure you share my frustration.

Anyway, the water hazard and several others are negotiated, and I'm on the road into Carnarvon Gorge. Having been here a few times before I'm familiar with the one lane sealed dead-end road in, the unfenced livestock grazing, and the magnificent sandstone cliffs and gorges that frame this incredible landscape.

I'm less familiar with the storm I'm heading into, the biblical rain that's making the road very hard to navigate, or the fast-rising multiple flood ways and creek crossings. By the time I reach the sidetrack into my destination, the Carnarvon Creek is an impassable torrent. Bigger! I call the park and they confirm that there's no chance of getting in and best to hightail it outta there. Two creek crossings back toward the highway, and it's clear I'm going to get stuck. A quick U-turn and up to higher ground for what I expected to be a night in the truck. Found some mobile reception and called the managing director. A less sympathetic response I cannot recall, albeit she did appear somewhat relieved that my immediate demise was unlikely.

Then I recalled that the day use area at the entrance to the many gorge walks had toilets and covered areas. A better option for a rough night, if I could get there. The double back proved only slightly perilous, and I made it through the final floodway into the Carnarvon National Park. It was here that divine providence stepped in. A light... and not just any light. The lights of a bar and restaurant. The Carnarvon Wilderness Lodge, previously closed, had reopened for the hiking season. As I emerged from the darkness to seek accommodation, the shock and surprise of my arrival garnered various comments from the staff. Some cannot be repeated but a general "where the hell did you come from?" best summarises the response. Now trapped with the staff and two other guests, but safe and very happy in my deluxe glamping tent, the situation went from a bit scary to quite cool. I got out 3 days later while the Carnarvon Creek continued to deny access to walking tracks and the Big 4 van park.

From Carnarvon I travelled via Barcaldine and Longreach to Winton and back with a further 3 nights at the Wilderness Lodge. To my earlier point, what have I learned? I've travelled out here a bit in my life and it always strikes me that it's a hell of a long way with vast areas of nothing much. Magnificent after rain, but the further west you go perhaps less appealing in dry weather. In terms of accommodation options, the proprietors of the Barcaldine Country Motor Inn have done something clever. They've added prefabricated villas, a pool and a laundry plus a few powered van sites to their motel and created an absolutely immaculate oasis for travellers. A town with much history and a nice vibe if you want a taste of the country life.

Longreach is well worth a visit but go in winter and not after lots of rain. The Saltbush Retreat has beautiful rustic themed cabins and is close to the Qantas Founders Museum and the Stockman's Hall of Fame. In Winton I stayed at the Boulder Opal Motor Inn. Pretty typical country motel managed by very helpful people. Even lent me a blower to get the dust out of the back of the truck.

Having grown up out west I have an affinity with these places that may not resonate with city folk. Regardless, do yourselves a favour and visit Carnarvon Gorge and the related sandstone region national parks. A truly world class natural wonder, a place of special Indigenous cultural significance, with a very nice glamping lodge and a nearby Big 4 park.

In closing, I've learned something else on this trip. Things can go sideways in a big hurry out here and no amount of bureaucratic sloganeering will save you if you've become reliant on big brother to keep you safe. Common sense, life experience, and a deep fear of dying and inconveniencing the MD in your life are way better strategies.

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