

The mechanic of Birdsville

Birdsville is famous for its race day. If you saw the Birdsville Race Track between events, you wouldn't bother taking the lens cap off the camera.

It's a pleasant enough little town, as outback towns go, but step just a few paces in any direction and you are in extreme isolation. This is the Australian outback, on the edge of the Simpson Desert.

This is not a tourist destination for amateurs. The famed Birdsville Track is more of a six-lane gibber highway in parts than a track, but the moment you veer away from it, you're on your own. There's a big signpost outside the Birdsville police station warning anyone thinking of heading west into the Simpson to check in first, and if you are a foreign tourist, you must phone your embassy. If a rescue is mounted, it can cost anything up to \$8,000 or so to drag a crippled vehicle and its occupants out of the desert.

The sand tracks which radiate out to the Simpson Desert beyond Birdsville attract the unwary: the blowhard from the city with his fancy four wheel drive who thinks his fifty grand's worth of technology will get him anywhere.

‘He's rescued quite a few vehicles with this machine. If it wasn't at Birdsville, there'd be a few rusting hulks on the desert landscape.’

Tell that to Peter Barnes, a laconic "seen it all" mechanic, who with his wife Bronwynne runs Birdsville's first and only garage and repair centre.

On the eve of researching this story, Peter interrupted the interview to take a call. "I gotta go. Rescue some guy in a Korean four-wheel drive that's broken down about a 180 clicks from here."

He went out to the yard and fired up his 13 litre aircooled Deutz V8, sitting under the cabin of a vehicle that might have starred in *Mad Max*.

He drove most of the day and into the night. Got two punctures. All part of the trip. He's well equipped. After all, this vehicle that he's converted into a recovery truck for the desert used to carry tanks and bullets into battle for the German army. It's a MAN army carrier (no, apparently not the same MAN you can see on any highway in Australia today).

Peter arrived back at his garage in Birdsville at 8.00am the following day.

He bought the truck about 15 years ago, and for a time ran around the country in a mobile home he'd built onto the back. In the meantime, he had converted it to right-hand drive. To turn it into a recovery vehicle, he got rid of the mobile home and replaced it with a tilt tray for dragging vehicles out of the sand.



Peter Barnes



Peter made his first mustering vehicle while managing a cattle station. Ordinary vehicles can't stand the pace. This one began life as an 80 series Toyota station wagon. He and a mate, Mark Hemley (in the pic), a boilermaker at Birdsville, knocked out quite a few of them over the years and most of them, like this one which is 25 years old, are still running and doing their job.



He's rescued quite a few vehicles with this machine. If it wasn't at Birdsville, there'd be a few rusting hulks on the desert landscape.

Peter is the lessee of Birdsville Auto, the pioneer workshop and fuel station for Birdsville, first established in a primitive shed across the road in 1990.

Partially thanks to the publicity given to the Birdsville race meeting, this town at the gateway to the Simpson Desert is growing up fast. Best you visit before it becomes so sophisticated it loses its battered charm and historic characters, like Barnsey.

Earning his mechanic's ticket at Millicent, near Mt Gambier in South Australia, Peter Barnes worked on a variety of vehicles for about nine years, fixing everything from bulldozers to lawnmowers.

He heard that a remote cattle station at Bedourie, Karaman Downs, needed an on-site mechanic. He jumped at the chance, and the challenge.

He was aware that nearby at Birdsville, there was no garage, and no mechanic, so in 1984, became the town's first mechanic. A business friend then built the first big service station and workshop in 1990 and Peter moved in as mechanic.



To the rescue.



An original 13 litre air-cooled Deutz V8.



Peter's converted Deutz at work.

The urge to travel took over again and Peter moved to Rabaul, New Guinea, in 1996, working as a mechanic there for almost a year.

Then back to manage a cattle station on the infamous Strzelecki Track, for about six and a half years.

"How big was this place," I asked, totally unprepared for the enormity of the reply.

"Two million acres. Had one paddock of a million acres and divided the other million into eight paddocks. Only 7,000 head of cattle."

Eventually, he returns to Birdsville to run the big Birdsville Auto Centre. "Why?" I asked. "Like the variety. Like the challenge. I simply enjoy the place. Don't worry, I have a good time and it suits me," grins Peter, surrounded

by trucks, tractors and bulldozers all waiting for his mechanical attention, or parts.

Trucks bring big stuff to Birdsville from Adelaide and Brisbane once very two weeks. Urgent small parts can reach him by regular flights every few days.

What spare time he has, Peter designs off-road mustering vehicles, and on the subject of off-road, Peter is a bit of a legend himself. He builds or rebuilds off-road racers, which his son drives in major events on the circuit.

In the Birdsville pub most nights, you'll find Peter, regaling anyone who's interested with fascinating stories of his off-road conquests and describing in intimate technical detail how different engines, suspensions and power trains respond to the rigours of racing and the bush. ▲

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