

# “Half a Continent in 80 Days”

(Travelling solo around Australia, and living to tell the tale)”

**Talk by Dr Helena Griffiths, 18 November 2025 Review by Marlene**

Our speaker for the November u3a General Meeting was well-equipped by profession to undertake the adventure outlined in the subtitle of her talk. Dr Helena Griffiths had been working in Australia, and when her job there as exploration geologist in the oil and gas industry came to an end, she decided she wanted to see more of the westernmost part of the Australian continent.

Starting from Perth, she intended to explore the amazing terrain of the western continent by herself. Most tourists stay in hotels and use touring vehicles to make expeditions into wadis and similar outback destinations. Her aim was to be self-sufficient and use



campsites in the various national parks. She set off in a Toyota Freelander (a very common choice for travel in these parts), with her gnome called Darren placed in a prominent position to make her vehicle more memorable among other travellers.

As she was planning to cover 20,000 km over 3 states without an itinerary, she had to ensure a suitable measure of self-sufficiency. We learned this included the following supplies: 60 litres water for washing, 30 litres water for drinking, 60 litres extra diesel fuel and food for 10 days. She had even undertaken a couple of mechanics courses and was proud of the fact that she suffered no flat tyre incidents in the difficult terrain (but did however lose battery power). Mobile phone coverage being poor, she had devices for using satellite communication systems, enabling family to track her.

Travelling surfaces varied from tarmac, dirt roads (generating a lot of dust and corrugated surfaces) and dust bowls. For driving through water, the vehicle had a “snorkel”, and Helena gave us an amusing anecdote about waiting for another vehicle’s attempt before risking her own first traverse.

An overview of facilities in the national parks campsites followed, introducing us to drop toilets with no running water, solar-powered showers, and only rarely, the luxury of a bath.

Water was often heated up using a “donkey” (a hot water storage method). However, in Bitter Springs, Eley National Park, she was able to swim in the mineral spring waters there.

Springtime is seemingly the right time of the year for such travels. Helena did highlight some factors such as the wildlife which have to be taken into consideration. Snakes mostly flee or disappear when one gets close (except the one which didn’t!), flies are another major factor, especially after rain and near cattle country, for which head nets are necessary. As for saltwater crocodiles, maps show red zones where they were prevalent, and helicopters were used to pick them up and relocate them. Freshwater crocodiles tend not to go for humans and are not such a problem for travellers.

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One example of the many interesting facts we learned: bower bird nests, created and maintained by the males, decorated with white and shiny objects to attract the females, are being monitored by some ecologists to assess human impact on their environment. Another pertained to the Northern Quoll, which is one of the most endangered species due to the cane toad problem. A novel way of alleviating this situation is making bad-tasting cane toad replicas to deter the quoll from eating them.

In addition to introducing us to the sights and wildlife on her journeying, Helena also gave us information on pebble deserts, artesian basins, aboriginal art and the natural ochres used to create them, and a brief overview of what it was like to live on cattle stations, far from schools and similar.

The final part of Helena's talk ranged from the first sighting of the Southern Ocean (shark breeding grounds) to crossing the Nullabor Plains (some 1600 km). The long treeless stretch of road through this has golf holes at intervals to add interest and reduce fatigue and accidents.

After her talk, Helena fielded several questions from the audience, about avoiding "nasties" while camping ("pitch your tent on top of your vehicle") and near misses with kangaroos ("do not drive early morning or evening") and touched briefly on medical emergency packs and the Flying Doctors Service.

We would like to thank Dr Griffiths for this very entertaining account of her epic journey.

And, by the way, Helena's last stop was in Gnomesville, Wellington Mill WA, to leave Darren the Gnome there (together with a note on his hat to say where he had been), but sadly, subsequent flooding in the area has since taken him away.

