

modern

MOTOR



COMPARISON!
Australia's six top-selling,
2.0-litre, four-cylinder sedans.

Staff photographer Greg McBean and his lady friend Jan Mason - Kiwis both borrowed a Peugeot 504 diesel for their first long look at inland Australia. A month and 7000 kilometres later they returned with some relevant comments on the car, our country, and its people. Greg took the accompanying photos while Jan put her thoughts into words.

Kiwis on Safari

More an Odyssey than a road test.



WITH an appetite for outback Australia whetted by a regular television diet of the ABC's Big Country and several weekend trips to western NSW, we sat down to plan a four-week foray into the Dead Heart.

Birdsville, it was agreed, was our number one priority, for it — possibly more than any other place on the map — epitomises the Aussie outback.

We organised a rough travel schedule around this outpost of civilisation and arranged to borrow a Peugeot 504 diesel from national distributor, Renault Australia.

It was a joyful reunion with the Peugeot marque — I passed my New Zealand driving licence over 10 years ago in my parents' 403

The Pug proved a wise choice. Diesel-powered, its fuel consumption figures would flatter a car half its size. And Peugeots have that comforting reputation for ruggedness and reliability, so essential when venturing off the beaten track into territory where spare parts and motorists' associations are not always close at hand.

We assembled our camping gear — a two-person tent, a gas ring, sleeping bags, a comprehensive first-aid kit, airbed and inflatable dinghy and drew up long lists of provisions. One began "garlic" and ended "tea-towels", another ran from sesame seeds to shoe polish. Along with the camera and a carton of wine, it took four wobbly trips to the Peugeot to stow the luggage into its capacious boot.

Departing from Sydney, we headed northwest towards Dubbo, first stopover on our projected 7000 km, month-long look around Australia's dead heart.

Two days of freezing nights and sweltering days marked our stay in Dubbo — the town that has launched a thousand uncomplimentary quips, but for all of this it boasts some of the richest farmland in all of NSW.

Then it was on through Warren and the Macquarie Marshes where we planned to spend several days before heading for Enngonia, north of Bourke.

We had to abandon our projected exploration of the marshes — a sanctuary and haven for many varieties of birdlife — as the drought had reduced water levels. Unable to float our rubber dinghy, we had to settle for a brief exploration on foot.

It was in this area that the Peugeot was

initiated into dirt surfaces and, between dodging semis and galahs (of the feathered and motoring variety), it performed splendidly. Diesels don't like a fast pace but travelling at our conservative 120 km/h pace appeared to its liking.

From Warren we pointed the Pug through the area's cotton fields and wheat silos to Nevertire (a misnomer, I believe), where we filled up with diesel at 34 cents per litre, close to the cheapest for the whole trip.

At Coolabah during a morning teastop we sampled the local speciality, Burgess Ginger Beer, made in Cobar. Recommended by the

garage proprietor as "a good brew", we washed away the dust with the contents of a 370 ml bottle, and came away convinced of the local kick-a-poo juice's potency.

The Peugeot delighted us with its comfortable and quiet long-legged cruising capacity. Sitting anywhere between 100 and 135 kph (its maximum speed) the 504 was bereft of the diesel "rattle" so evident at idle.

We paused for lunch alongside the brown Darling River, at North Bourke and watched the water skiers as the billy boiled. Between bites we New Zealanders polished up our Great Australian Salute.

We left the Darling and its flies and climbed back into the air-conditioned Peugeot for the final 95 km to Enngonia. At this stage the airconditioning was a godsend, but further north we were to find that the Australian-made Alex unit was inadequate and also irritatingly noisy — hardly up to the standard expected of a \$13,000 motor car.

Old friends were our hospitable hosts at Enngonia, and as luck would have it, our arrival coincided with the annual country horse racing "carnival". The Enngonia races can be best described as Birdsville ... without the mountains of beer cans.

After Enngonia, the next objective was Birdsville, legendary town of the Queensland outback. The schedule had us going via the country towns of Cunnamulla, Quilpie and Windorah — fly specks on the atlas.

Slipping over the NSW-Queensland border we noticed the hand-painted warning: "No shooting — and don't ask". Ironically there were a couple of bullet holes in the sign ... This was real outback Australia — a few grey-green trees near the road, more on the horizon, sparse dry grass and no stock to be seen. The edges of the road were scattered with strips of torn tyres, legacy of many a truckie's near disaster. The only traffic we sighted were semis, travelling at speed.

We stopped at Cunnamulla for fuel and a cleaned windscreen, then continued westward ...

Reaching the tiny town of Eulo we stopped to buy postage stamps and were introduced to the post office cat, dog and cockatoo. Eulo's main attractions are the hotel, the mud springs which look like enormous anthills, and the nearby Yowah opal fields.

A quick inspection of the Peugeot to see how it was standing up to the trip's rigours revealed the speedo cable sagging below the car. A totally-inadequate nylon clip, holding the cable close to the chassis, had broken under the arduous conditions.

Taping the cable up with masking tape was only temporarily successful, and we drove the 188 km of dirt to the nearest town, Quilpie, with the cable hanging. A garage man in Quilpie remedied the problem with two plastic circlips and relieved us of four bucks for his trouble.

Heading into an ever-lowering sun, with Windorah way ahead and Sydney light years behind, we quit the road and set up camp for the night. After a careful inspection for bull-ants, the tent was raised, and a bottle of burgundy opened, while a curry simmered gently over our small fire. The night was very still; the far-off roar of an occasional semi the only reminder of civilisation.

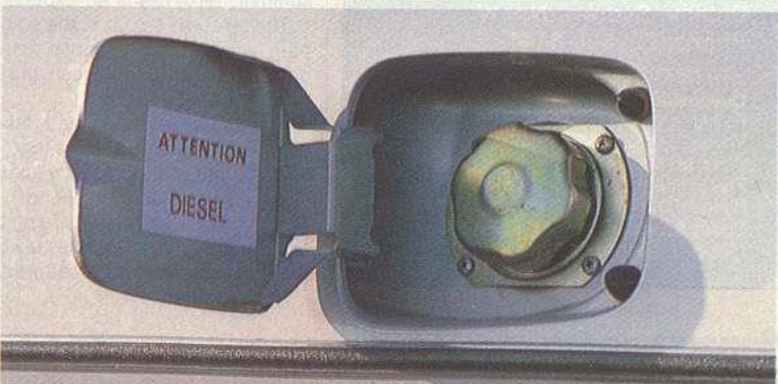
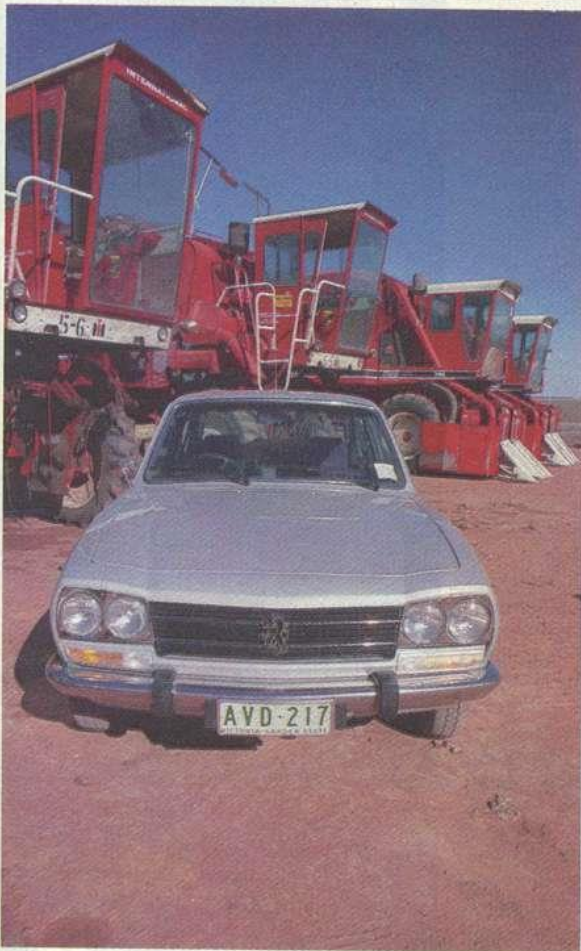
At 6am we were again quickly eating up the kilometres to Windorah, thus enabling us to arrive at Birdsville the same day. The road was again clear of traffic; seeing no cars in the rear vision mirror during a whole day's driving is a novel experience for a city dweller! But care was necessary at times to avoid suicidal kangaroos and a variety of other car-damaging wildlife.

Windorah was very much a sleepy out-west town, with wide quiet streets, three old men chewing the fat outside the general store, and a couple of horses wandering down the road.

While filling up at the general store, the shopkeeper asked what the car was, as she had never seen such a conventional-looking car take diesel. Her interest in the car,



Grim message for Birdsville trekkers.



There's nothing quite as desolate as the Australian outback (top and top right). The squat lines (above) of the 504 present a stark contrast to the angular lines of the big cotton harvesters. The heat haze (above right) shows just how hot it gets out there. Diesel (right) is readily available in the outback and prices vary from 32.5 to 40 cents a litre.

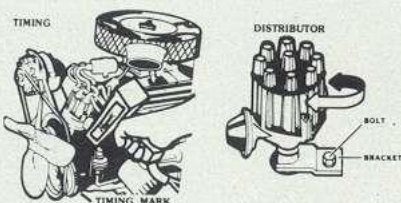
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however, did nothing to offset the price of the fuel — expensive at 40 cents per litre.

We reported our intentions to the local police, obeying the notice that stood on the road out of Windorah, and refilled our jerrycans with water. After checking the two alternative Birdsville routes we followed advice to take the southern road through Betoota, and headed off down the road to Birdsville.

While still on the tar stretch before the Betoota turn-off, the surrounding land reached away from the road on either side to hills that floated like islands in the heat haze. Coming on to the dirt, the vista changed and only sparse tussocky grass met our eyes. For several kilometres the only life we saw were a magnificent pair of wedge-tailed eagles playing the thermals.

The road surface now varied from coarse, almost bouldery gravel to rock, or degenerated into a morass of bulldust.

The Peugeot shone in these conditions. The compliance of the all-independent suspension (MacPherson struts at the front, A-frame arms with coils and anti-roll bar at the back) made for comfortable, untroubled progress in the difficult conditions, which at times saw the Peugeot virtually enveloped in clinging drifts of the malignant bulldust.

The seats too, played their part. As comfortable as any, they had, however, one annoying drawback in the hot dry conditions. Being velour we found they caused a buildup of static electricity, which, when earthed by either entry or exit from the car resulted in an unpleasant shock.

Suddenly rounding a corner, we encountered a signpost reading "Betoota-76". We zeroed the trip meter, but after about 85 km it was clear that the influence of the Metric Conversion Board doesn't extend to Birdsville. Finally reaching Betoota, we discovered one lone pub instead of the "small town" marked on the map. We were the first travellers to pass through that day and the German proprietor appeared to welcome our conversation when we stopped for a quick drink.

Leaving Betoota, we came across a water tank with a windmill, and saw for the first time those ebullient birds of the west, corellas. Thousands upon thousands, defiantly and deafeningly protesting our invasion of their territory.

Travelling through the magenta-brown rock of the stony desert to Birdsville, the road climbed roller-coaster inclines to crests. At the top it felt like the roof of the world, with the plain stretching endlessly into the distance and the thin snake of the road trailing off, mirage-like, into the heat-haze.

Then ... Birdsville, home of one of Australia's most famous — and isolated — hotels.

A quotation from a postcard bought at the general store best sums up Birdsville: "Whether in drought time or flood time, in the mild days of winter or the searing heat of summer, Birdsville is an *experience*."

The tent was set up in the so-called caravan park, a bare stony expanse between the bore drain and the road. Green grass is a luxury Birdsville cannot afford.

The Birdsville races had taken place the previous weekend and as one of the locals said, he had self-indulgently luxuriated in "The Great Australian Weekend". He wasn't Robinson Crusoe either, judging by the amount and variety of dead marines laying to rest over the racecourse and scattered around the

township itself.

A visit to the bore drain revealed a prolific array of birdlife, including spoonbills, pelicans sailing in formation, a nesting kite, cormorants, and even a ubiquitous seagull with dubious navigational ability! Following the tourist trail, drinks at the Birdsville hotel were a must, as was a look at the tree into which explorers Burke and Wills cut their initials in 1860, only months before their deaths.

Our original plan was to use the Birdsville track from South Australia. Lack of time precluded this, but once in Birdsville we made an 80 km foray down the track. It appeared well used, and bearing this out we sighted two other vehicles and a motorcyclist on a R100 BMW who passed us, headed for Adelaide.

Next day, we rose at 5 am and left town before sunrise. The Peugeot's headlights melted the darkness until the sun came up, blindingly bright, as the road runs due east directly into the rising sun. A few scraggy emus and a family of kangaroos were the only inhabitants of the dawn landscape.

After stopping again in Windorah to let the police know that we had made our return, we



The 2304 cc Pug oiler has an enviable reputation among French cabbies in France, where it is the dominant engine on taxi fleets. It's a long way from Paris to Birdsville ...

refuelled, stocked up on food and then hit the road for the 462 km stretch to Charleville, where we planned to stop for the night.

That evening in Charleville a quick fuel consumption check confirmed the Peugeot was particularly kind to our pocketbook, averaging 7.26 litres/100 km, or 38.9 mpg! This economical average was maintained throughout our journey ...

After a leisurely run to Carnarvon Gorge National Park, we set up camp and prepared a meal. The chili con carne was just being served when we were startled by a curious thumping noise. The hot breath at our backs announced a kangaroo, complete with joey, waiting for a handout! After that we were scarcely surprised when a possum ambled down from the nearest tree, also seeking a share.

Day begins at Carnarvon with first light. Immediately the birds awake and begin their daily business with a cacophony of sound. Breakfast over, and the eager kangaroos and currawongs fended off, we headed off to explore Carnarvon. The scenery is spectacular, with huge rocky buttresses on either side of a lush green gorge (which has several attractive

walks), excellent examples of aboriginal art, and much interesting wildlife. Spending three days there before moving on, we left with great reluctance, promising ourselves that we would return. A more complete contrast to the harsh desert beauty of Birdsville could hardly be imagined.

Yet a further contrast was the Cooloola National Park, some 900 km away on the coast.

There the Peugeot, already baptised on rough back country roads, had thick sand to contend with. In the run into the camping area, some 14 km off the sealed road, a predominantly downhill grade helped considerably, but had us worried for the return trip.

Freshwater Camp opens on to a long beach, with the wreck of the "Cherry Venture", a result of the cyclone in 1973, the main feature before the beautiful multi-coloured sands are reached at the appropriately named Rainbow Beach. A walk to the wreck proved to be an interesting way to spend a morning.

Cooloola also has a strange freak of nature. Perched lakes — lakes formed by water collecting in hollows in sand, lined with leaf mould and debris which has a water-proofing effect. A visit to one of these lakes was undertaken and the inflatable dinghy used to explore the water-ways. The exploration was not, however, entirely trouble-free, as going up the first moderately sloped incline, the sand proved too much for the softly-suspended Peugeot, and a severe case of axle tramp stopped us dead.

Enthusiastic pushing didn't help, and it was our ignominious fate to be towed from the scene by a buzzing Suzuki 4WD.

Thoughts that evening were of the return to tar-sealed comfort over the 14 km of sand. Our fears were to be groundless, as dropping the tyre pressure from 30 psi to 18 psi had the Peugeot accomplishing the journey without undue difficulty. Tyres reinflated, we set off back the way we came, down through Noosa and Maroochydore to Brisbane.

Into NSW again, we paused for a day trip to Lamington National Park. With its near-neutral handling the car revelled in the winding roads up to O'Reilly's guest house, and the vista over the Green Mountains proved to be well worth the trip. Crimson rosella and brush turkeys cheekily investigated us during a lunch stop, and that most spectacular of native birds, the black and gold regent bowerbird, snatched bread from our outstretched fingers.

We drove back to Kingscliff in the dark with the memory of the birds and scenery counter-pointing Bach's Brandenburg Concertos on the Peugeot's Sanyo stereo cassette. A huge orange moon rose over the Green Mountains, and the headlights illuminated tracer attacks of moths.

Leaving Kingscliff we headed the Peugeot south into the smoke haze of unseasonable bush fires.

Then, with Sydney only an outstretched arm away, we had our first real "moment". On a 100 km corner close to Grafton, an on-coming semi did its best to destroy the Peugeot's windscreen with a stone that hit with the sound of gunshot. Luckily the screen, a laminated one, lasted the journey home, albeit scarred with a nasty chip. After driving through 7000 km of difficult roads unscathed, it was one of those irritating incidents, to be caught so close to home. □

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