

AUSTRALIAN AGE OF DINOSAURS CELEBRATIONS AT WINTON, QUEENSLAND

Earlier this year my husband Gerry and I received an invitation to participate in the celebration of the launch of the 3rd stage of the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum in Winton, Queensland. As we had yet to visit the AAOD centre, we decided to accept the invitation and at the end of May we headed north. We really didn't need an excuse to visit western Queensland; having been there a few times in the past we looked forward to seeing the open plains and big sky once again.

Unfortunately, this part of Australia is in the grip of a long-term drought, which was most evident when we drove through northern New South Wales. Everything looked so dry, even the ubiquitous eucalypts.

We arrived in Winton on Saturday 30th May and after visiting the famous Waltzing Matilda Centre in town we headed for the Jump-Up, about 20 km outside Winton where the AAOD Reception Centre is situated. Having read about the AAOD Reception Centre from its planning stage through to its official opening in April 2012, I did not expect to see such an innovative building in one of the most spectacular settings one could envisage. The Jump-Up is the name given to an impressive flat topped mesa just outside Winton, which was donated to the AAOD by a local family. It covers an area of 1800 hectares and provides breath-taking views of the surrounding countryside as well as being the perfect setting for AAOD.

The AAOD Reception Centre houses a dinosaur-themed shop and café, but most importantly, you get to see some real dinosaur bones in the fossil gallery. The bones of *Australovenator wintonensis* (Banjo) and *Diamantinasaurus matildae* (Matilda) are on display, along with reconstructions of what they may have looked like. In fact, on your arrival at the AAOD Reception Centre you are greeted by a life size model of "Banjo", which is very life-like and looks like it is straight out of Jurassic World.

However, the AAOD Reception Centre is only stage 2 of mastermind David Elliott's plan for the Jump-Up. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the founders of AAOD, David Elliott and his wife Judy are the driving force behind the amazing work that has gone on in this remote part of Australia for the last 16 years. In 1999 David discovered dinosaur bones on his property and decided that the world should learn about them. Since then he and Judy have dedicated their lives to building the AAOD and have gathered an ever growing, diverse group of supporters and staff who have joined them in their dream. I first met David and Judy when they visited the Dinosaur Dreaming dig in 2008, but I must admit that I didn't really know that much about what they were creating in Winton. It wasn't until I saw them in their natural environment, surrounded by enthusiastic volunteers and staff, in the middle of a dry paddock, beside a hole in the ground, containing a huge sauropod dinosaur scapula, that I appreciated what they have achieved.

On the 31st of May David Elliott led a group of guests to another location on the Jump-Up, approximately one kilometre from the Reception Centre, where Dame Quentin Bryce launched the third stage of the Elliott's dream – the site of the future AAOD Museum. The AAOD team had already installed concrete walkways down the side of the Jump-Up, which would eventually lead to galleries of bronze, life-size dinosaurs and pterosaurs. There were information panels depicting what the future world-class Museum would look like and I for one, can't wait to return in a few years time to see David and Judy's dream come to fruition.

The official launch was followed that night by a celebratory fund-raising dinner and auction in Winton's town hall. It was a fun evening, with David performing a hilarious double act with George, one of the regular AAOD team and impromptu auctioneer. George even auctioned off himself and raised \$800 in the process.

We would like to thank David, Judy and the AAOD team for making us so welcome during our stay in Winton. The spirit of these people, who live in such a harsh environment, cannot be overstated. This was particularly demonstrated a few weeks after we left when the iconic Waltzing Matilda centre and Information Centre was extensively damaged by fire. By lunch time the next day a location for a temporary Information Centre had been found and was open to the public and an email from David Elliott informed me that the town was already planning on rebuilding the Waltzing Matilda Centre to be bigger and better than before.

If you are planning on a trip up to Western Queensland in the near future don't forget to call in at Winton and visit the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Reception Centre. You will be in for a treat.

Next month: At an AAOD dinosaur dig, Queensland.

IMAGES: all photographed by Gerry.



1. AAOD Reception Centre on the Jump-Up, Winton, Qld.



2. Australovenator wintonensis (Banjo) on display in AAOD Reception Centre



3. Diamontinasaurus matildae (Matilda) on display in AAOD Reception Centre



4. View of surrounding countryside from café in AAOD Reception Centre



5. David Elliott at the launch of stage 3 of the AAOD Museum



6. Part of the walkways leading to future dinosaur galleries



7. Concept art of new AAOD Museum



8. Gerry and Banjo