



BIRDSDVILLE RACES 2004



Centre One Tours Australia has been running tours to the Birdsville Races for the last 10 years. We operate the ONLY accommodated tour to the races; in 2004, the tour had 33 passengers, a crew of four on board and a support team of three to set up our camp at Birdsville before the coach arrived. Read about our adventures and what some of the locals and our passengers had to say

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Russell and his mates guard the entrance to the Birdsville Caravan Park, beer in one hand and a tray stacked with cash on the plastic table in front of them. Yarns and laughs suffice as entertainment as they chat to the thousands of people walking past at all hours paying for use of the amenities. They've become the concierge of the country, the valet of the vast, and, their etiquette is according; "straight ahead love, should be clean, may be busy, hope the water's hot" he yells after her, swiping some flies away from his outback uniform of jeans, flanno, akubra and RM's.

He raises the stubby closer to his face; a face character carved from wrinkles and with a skin which is as likely to be tanned from the dust that carpets his workplace than from the hard sun beating down. He's no local though, he volunteers every year to help out on this first weekend in September, when the middle of the Australian nowhere comes alive for the Birdsville Races.

"Volunteer? Nah We're paid for this; one beer per hour on the hour is the going rate, two for the afternoon shift, three for any over time after that" Russell from Townsville tells me. Since 1882, Birdsville, a little town of 120 in the centre of the outback, approximately 65km from the Simpson desert and over five hours drive from the nearest civilization in Marree, hosts the Birdsville Cup Horse Racing meet. Jockeys, trainers, horses and thousands of punters from all over Australia and the world come to share in this unique event. Unique in itself to see how this outback town with just a pub, petrol station, clinic and local store with a geographic location as remote as a pair of stilettos at its bar, or a fancy cocktail on the menu, caters for over 6,000 people on this one weekend of the year.



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"It's a bit of a logistical, well, nightmare really isn't the best word, but an enormous amount of time and effort goes in from the whole town to make it happen" said Gary Brooks from the Birdsville Race Club Inc. People come from all over Australia to help; police from Adelaide patrol the roads, race officials from Brisbane and Sydney help at the track and Collex are contracted to provide bins and toilets and to clean up the streets, race track and areas of entertainment. "Collex are great, they're out there be it at 12 or 2am scraping up all the empty cans and mess, so we can wake up at six and have clean streets" said Gary.

Volunteers from the Royal Flying Doctor Service (whom, along with the Birdsville Clinic, the proceeds from the weekend are donated), Scouts Australia, friends, family and even Russell at the caravan park entrance are all on hand to make sure it all runs smoothly and problem free.

"Surprisingly we have very few problems, especially with violence. It's quite unique to have over 6000 people in an event of this nature where there is a fair amount of alcohol consumed and have literally no trouble" said Gary.

In the case of violence, Birdsville have developed their own unique way of dealing with troublemakers. Someone who looks as though they might cause a blue, is encouraged to instead, visit the boxing tent to vent their anger and frustration. It's Fred Brophy's tent and his boxing troupe is the last of its kind in Australia and a regular attraction at the races.

"I think he is one of the big reasons there is no trouble. He's seen people in the past where he's said these people are at each other and encourages them to take it to the tent instead. He's good too and ensures that nobody gets hurt" said Gary.



Accommodation can too cause a few problems. There are just 18 units at the pub and they are booked out years in advance. There is an expanse of dry, flat land for kilometres where you can pitch your tent, but there are just 22 powered sites at the local caravan park. "It really is just first in first serve here with the sites, the toilet and shower facilities are open to all for a price though" said Ruth Doyle owner of the caravan park. But there's just two sets of shower facilities for the thousands of visitors. Ruth needs over 14

volunteers and hires 8 extra cleaners each year to keep the facilities clean and running at all hours. "It's not always so much fun but a part of the weekend I guess" said Ruth while cleaning out one blocked toilet at 2am on the Sunday morning. Getting there is also a bit of a problem, there's not too many places in Australia that are harder to get to than Birdsville.

Over 200 planes fly there and stay the weekend, while the rest have just one other choice; to tackle the Birdsville Track. It's a dusty and rocky 514km stretch from Marree. Its dusty breath clouds the view and its stoned skin shatters back windscreens and sacrifices tyres. So hard to get to that if anything goes wrong. "Then it's just too bad really, it's just one of those places where if anything goes wrong, well, we'll just have to live with it and if we run out of anything, then we go without" said Gary.



With supplies arriving by roadtrain fortnightly, Birdsvillians have learnt to improvise in the face of complications. This year it was the satellite. "We've come up here and got everything ready then we found out that the satellite had shifted, we hadn't used it or tested it since the races last year. We need it to broadcast the races all around Australia" said Nigel Davies the race's technician from Adelaide.

Luckily Nigel had seen a guy in town with a satellite on the roof of his car fixing the telephone lines. "We drove off to find him and luckily he had the knowledge and equipment to shift the satellite back into position however, prior to that we found out that the cockies had chewed the cable and when we pulled the cable out water ran out of it" said Nigel.

"So long as we don't run out of beer I'm happy" said Russell from the caravan park. Content, sitting at the entrance with his mates, Russell doesn't even watch the horses race the dirt track anymore. "Nah, it's more entertaining here just watchn' all these people out and about".

Sounds like a lot of fun doesn't it? Well, join us this year and be a part of this unique Australian event.

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