

AN ADVENTURE WITH BETTY BUSH: JULIE DAWSON

The sign "CROCODILES DON'T GO TO HEAVEN – THEY JUST HEAD TO TIMBER CREEK" slows us down. Tempted we join Bruce's tour. 'Don't put any part of your body outside the boat' he says dangling a piece of meat in the water. 'Last bloke who went for a pee ... well!' We laugh, but as the crocodiles' jaws snap, we keep our elbows tucked in.

Much later Betty Bush lumbers along the dusty road. 'She's only good for the scrapheap', I moan. The nearest town is 180km away. It's dark and treacherous. We zigzag to avoid kangaroos keen to make friends with our bull bar. It's as if Betty hears me. With a crashing thump she launches herself into a pothole and shudders to a stop.

In a black cloud of buzzing mosquitos and 38 degree heat we change the tyre and set off once more. I click on the air conditioner. Nothing! Rivulets of sweat combine with the tears that run down my cheeks.

Betty Bush is not the brand-new Iveco camper we'd expected to pick up, but a battered Toyota 4WD converted camper. 'Take it or leave it,' they'd said in Darwin. For the last 600km we've slept with our noses touching the roof, no open windows – for a good reason, bugs, bugs and more bugs. Lighting the gas stove invites every fly in the Northern Territory to eat with us. Getting food from pan, to plate, to camper is a daily battle.

Eventually we stumble into town. The hire company pays for an air-conditioned motel room and a brand-new grey Camry. Bliss!

Betty's ready. 'A lovely old dear' says the mechanic. I snort and ask for directions to the car hire office. 'Follow, me Richard,' I shout. 'I've got a sat nav'. At the exit, I swing to the left and watch as in a cloud of orange dust, Betty roars to the right. Puzzled I do a U-turn. I see Betty and a grey Camry rocketing out of town. I slam my foot down and try to catch up. Deep in the desert Betty slews to a halt. Richard gets out looking confused.

'Richard, what happened?'

'Follow me,' you said, 'so I did. I couldn't work out why you were going so fast.'

We watch the dust trail of the distant grey Camry and burst into uncontrollable laughter.