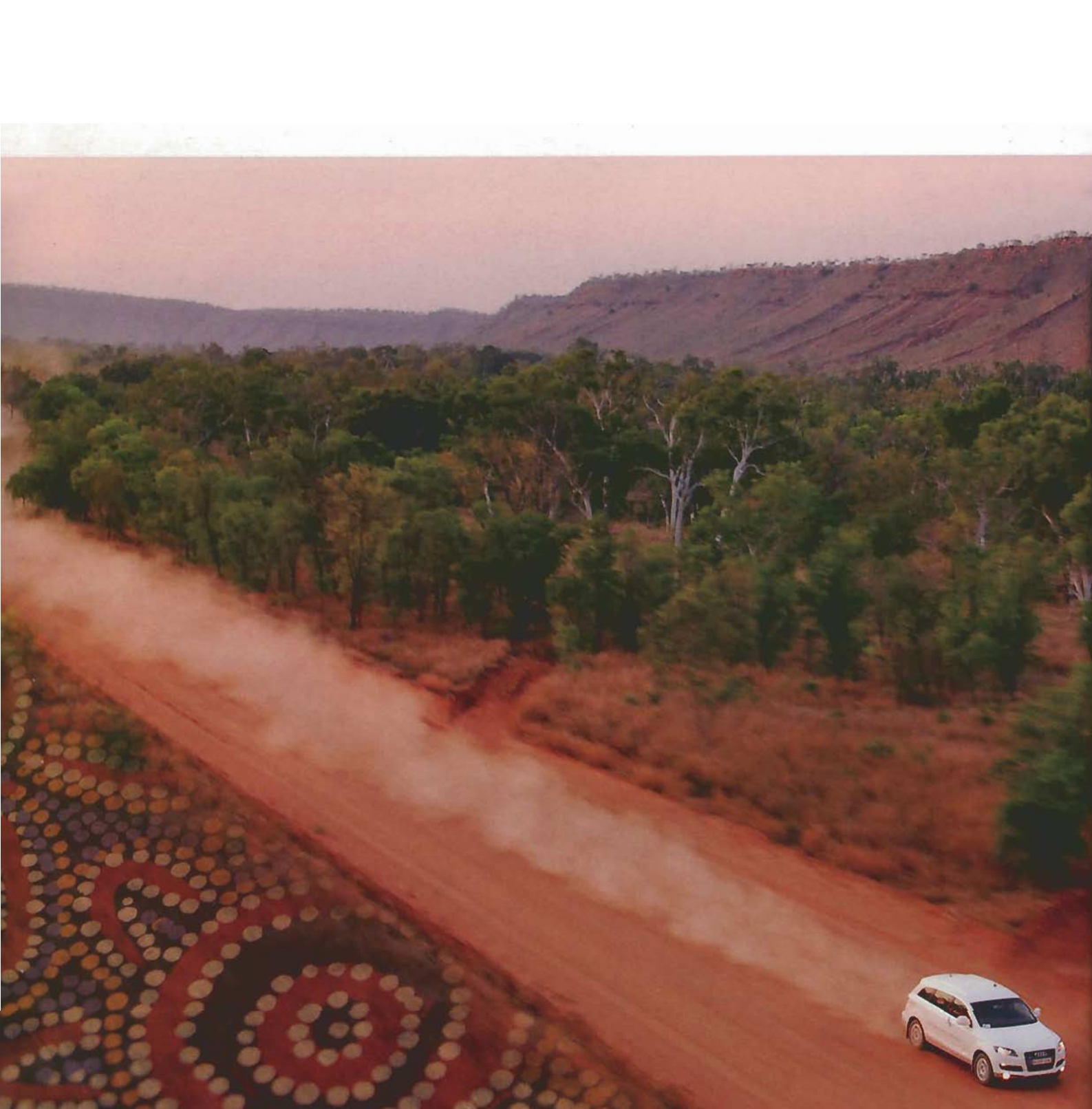


# Audi AUSTRALIA magazine

for people on the move 1/08



*Into the Outback*



# The Long Road

Forget any preconceived notions you might have of a drive in the country. Now in its second year and a renowned international event, the Audi Trans-Continental Crossing is an epic adventure through Australia's harsh red heart. Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines...

//BY SAM TINSON (TEXT & PHOTOS)



>> When a fleet of 15 unmodified Audi Q7s made the voyage east to west across Australia in 2006, the world sat up and took notice. The cars performed so well – suffering not a single mechanical fault over a collective total of 105,000 punishing kilometres – that requests for a repeat performance flooded in from around the globe. Suddenly everyone, it seemed, wanted to drive an Audi across the outback. Audi obliged, and last year, exactly 12 months after the inaugural voyage, the second Audi Trans-Continental Crossing left Sydney on its 7500km voyage west. This time it was an international affair, with guests from as far afield as France, America, Japan, Korea, Dubai, Germany, Russia and the USA taking part. For most it was their first trip Down Under, and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the wonder and isolation of the Australian bush.

#### **The vehicles**

For Audi, too, there were new arrivals. This time the Trans-Continental fleet included diesel powered Q7s, with their torquey 4.2-litre TDi engines, as well as the latest generation A6 allroad. Although the allroad was not designed to handle the same offroad challenges as its larger sibling, Audi's technical crew were confident it was up to the task. "The allroad is a brilliantly engineered car," said the team's flying technician Guenther Pol.



"It won't let us down when the going gets tough."

As with the previous year all the cars in the fleet were unmodified, identical to those you'd find at any Audi dealership aside from their Goodyear AT/R offroad tyres. Onboard equipment included UHF radios, cargo barriers, two spare tyres, extra water supplies and – a necessary luxury in the outback – portable fridges.

#### The route

Considering Australia's size, there are surprisingly few choices when it comes to picking a route across it. The team decided on a similar itinerary to the first voyage, zigzagging through iconic locations such as Birdsville, the Simpson Desert, Coober Pedy, Uluru, Kings Canyon and Alice Springs.

There was, however, one significant change to the route map. Instead of taking the 1000km-long, arrow-straight Tanami Track from the Red Centre to The Kimberley, the Audis would press further north to Kununnurra, then head southeast to Broome via the legendary Gibb River Road.

"The Tanami Desert was impressive, but this is a more scenic route which will offer our overseas guests more variety," said trip leader Phil Poulter. "Also, the water crossings on the Gibb River Road will be a great test for the cars."

In particular Phil was referring to the A6 allroads, with their shallower maximum wading depth. Taking the Gibb River Road meant fording the mighty Pentecost River, which has been known to stop even high-riding offroad 4WD vehicles in their tracks. If the water was too high the allroads would have to take the long way round, adding another 1000km to their



journey. Audi Australia is not one to turn down a challenge however, so the Gibb River Road route was chosen.

### The drivers

Rivers and deserts pose one kind of obstacle; language barriers are another problem altogether. The first overseas guests to join the trip included groups from Korea and Russia, and on the eve of departure from Broken Hill the Royal Exchange Hotel was buzzing with foreign tongues. Spirits were high, and you didn't need to be a linguist to pick up the excitement in the air.

As the convoy rolled out of the old mining town, headed for the first night's camping at Tibooburra, the radios crackled with Korean and Russian chatter. Every instruction from Phil – who had the tricky task of keeping the 20-car convoy together – had to be translated twice over, so it was a noisy start to the journey. However, once the group left the township behind for the endless expanse of the outback, things quietened down quickly. Awestruck silence sounds the same in any language.

### The challenge

Soon a pattern to the trip developed. Each new leg of the journey would begin with a hub-bub of excitement as one group of overseas guests replaced another, bringing new languages and new customs, but always the same sense of wonder at the scenery. And what scenery! From the rolling sand dunes of the Strzelecki Desert to the endless Moomba moonplains, from Uluru's rust-red presence to the scattered stone spheres of the Devil's

Marbles, the landscape the convoy passed through was an ever-changing panorama of stunning and surreal beauty.

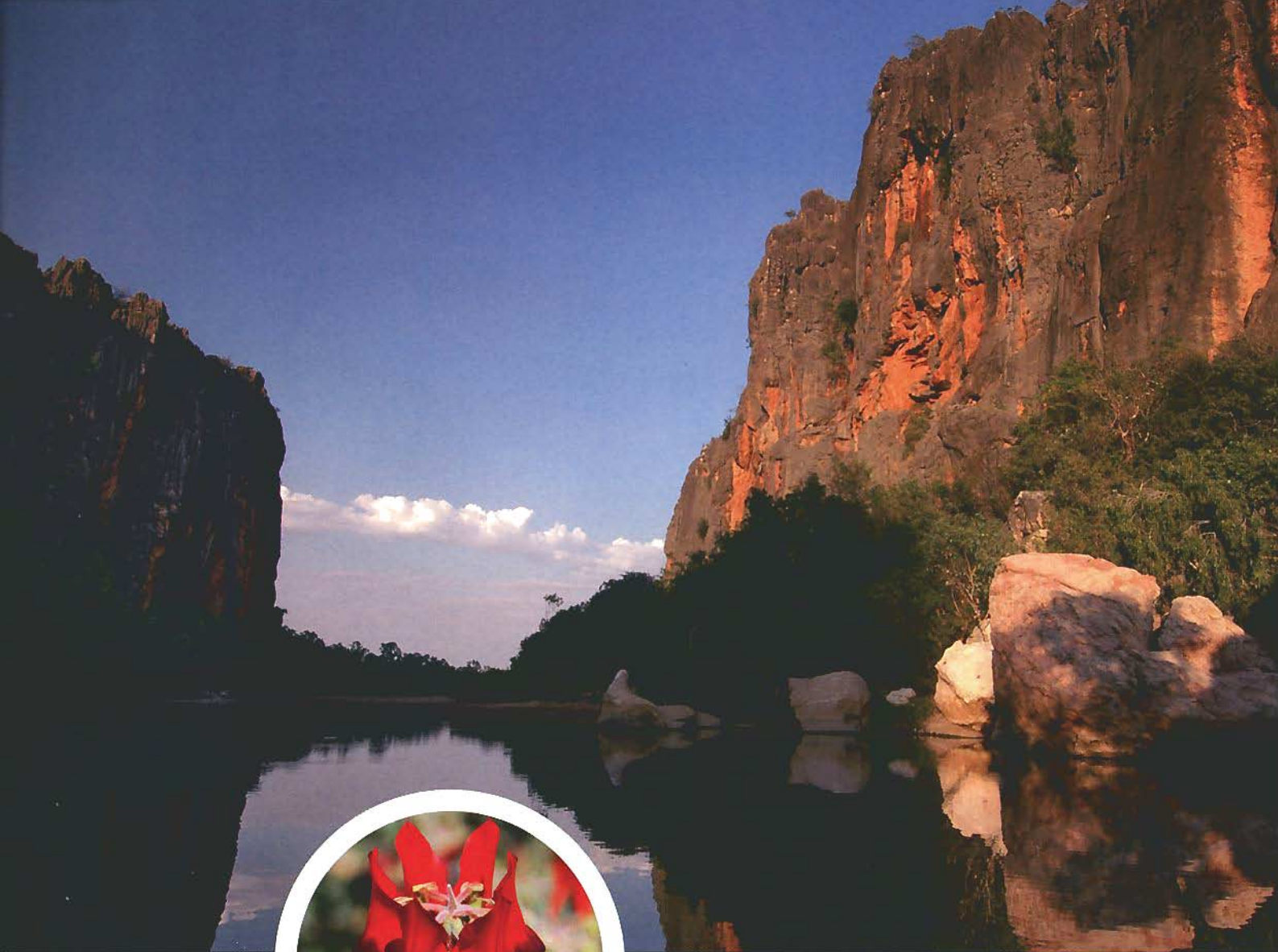
While landscape and languages changed, the performance of the Audis remained consistently outstanding. One by one, legendary obstacles of the outback were tackled and beaten; the tyre-shredding Strzelecki Desert, the sump-smashing stones of the Birdsville Track, the potholed Oodnadatta, the 40m-high slopes of Big Red (the Simpson Desert's tallest sand dune) and the skittery gravel of the Mereenie Loop Road were no match for Ingolstadt's four rings.

As expected the luxurious Q7s made light work of the rough terrain, while the responsiveness of the lighter A6 allroads, combined with their smooth ride and grip whatever the road surface, made them a favourite among the drivers. Once again reliability was not an issue; aside from the inevitable flat tyres, the tech crew had virtually no reason to dirty their hands.

### The experience

The comfortable ride provided by the Audis meant the team could drive huge distances (sometimes over 700km in a day), and still arrive refreshed enough to explore on foot. At Uluru, a walking tour followed by sunset drinks on a nearby dune and dinner beneath the stars was the perfect way to experience the magic of the giant rock. Likewise, a hike around the rim of Kings Canyon provided an opportunity to stretch legs and lungs, and witness the eye-popping views made famous in the film *Priscilla: Queen Of The Desert*.

There were early morning dips in plunging waterfalls where emerald



green dragonflies danced overhead, and trips deep into the rainforest to view Aboriginal rock art. At the million-acre El Questro cattle station some guests even took to the air, with a thrilling chopper ride along the twisting Chamberlain Gorge.

In the evenings the day's adventures were recounted around the campfire, or in the bar of a remote roadhouse. The team swapped tales of tyres burst, kangaroos sighted, rivers forded and rocks climbed, before retiring to their tents for a well-earned rest.

### **The final test**

After some three weeks on the road (or off it, in most cases) the convoy came to Pentecost River crossing on the Gibb River Road. Fortunately the water was not at its highest, but it was still high enough to lap at the doorsills of the A6 allroads. Another few centimetres of clearance were gained by switching the adaptive air suspension to 'lift mode', and with ESP ensuring solid grip on the slippery rocks of the riverbed the wagons reached the opposite shore without trouble.

When the convoy finally rolled onto the golden sands of Broome's Cable Beach a few days later, it was the trusty fleet of vehicles that were looked on with most affection by the team. The hardy A6s allroads had proven once again that, when asked to perform above and beyond the call of duty, an Audi will rise to the occasion and the mighty Q7 took every pothole and rut in its stride. Guenther Pol was especially proud. "I knew they would do it," he said, patting one of the mud-splattered cars affectionately. "And you know what? You could drive back to Sydney, no problem." <

