

THE

LONGEST

SHORT

CUT



ADVENTURE

Get behind the wheel and journey through Australia's desert centre on the Outback Way. **Natascha Mirosch** discovers a wild beauty she didn't realise existed. Photography by Rob Mulally.

It's early morning in Winton and the main street is lined with four-wheel drives. Clusters of chatty people are inserting or rearranging bags into Jenga-style piles in car boots, checking tyre pressures and comparing travel routes.

Everyone seems pretty relaxed – except me. I'm sipping what I presume is my last café-made coffee and wondering what the hell I'm doing here. A big city is my natural habitat. Places where doctors and hospitals and, yes, cafés are all within cooe. I drive a small car on well-kept bitumen roads and haven't been behind the wheel of a 4WD since I was 17. I've travelled the world but never ventured further than a couple of hours from Australia's state capitals.

Yet there's an undeniable frisson of excitement mixed with trepidation as I throw my bag in the boot, check my phone for what may be the last time and climb in.

Queensland's Winton is the start (or finish, depending on which direction you're travelling) of the Outback Way, known as "Australia's longest short cut". The 2800-kilometre route, which connects Winton with Laverton in Western Australia, traverses the country's red heart, crossing three states, passing through 10 different bioregions and knocking a couple of thousand kilometres off a "go round" trip. It's a mix of rutted bulldust tracks and sections of sealed road that will take you to a dramatically beautiful and ever-changing landscape, remote blink-and-you'll-miss-'em towns and cattle stations as big as entire nations.

We're in a rental Toyota 4WD kitted out with a sat phone and High Frequency radio, the regulation 20 litres of water per adult per day, spare tyres and recovery equipment. (Plus other "essentials", such as lollies and two bottles of wine in the fridge.)

My companions are one hardcore bush traveller and two others with a few remote trips under their belt. Me? I'm an utter outback novice.

Time constraints mean I'm only travelling for a week, along the sections to Yulara in the Northern Territory. And for the sake of comfort we're staying in hotels and permanent tents rather than pitching our own, for which I'm profoundly grateful. If you're short on time, it's possible to do the entire trip in 10 days (with overnight stops) or set a leisurely pace and spend a fortnight or more on the road. Six hours of driving a day with regular breaks is recommended as realistic and we're sharing shifts at the wheel.

Roadhouses, about 250 to 350 kilometres apart, are the lifeblood of the Outback Way – providing food, shelter, information on road conditions and equipment for basic repairs – but pubs are its beating heart. The North Gregory Hotel (northgregoryhotel.com), where we spend the night before our journey – and cheer on a chicken race with a crowd of footloose grey nomads, international backpackers and family holiday-makers – has a swag of claims to fame. The hotel hosted the first public performance of our unofficial anthem, Banjo Paterson's *Waltzing Matilda*, and the future United States president Lyndon B. Johnson stayed here when his plane was forced to land in the outback during World War II.

Winton is also famous for its prehistoric treasures. We head south-west of the town to Lark Quarry Conservation Park (dinosaurtrackways.com.au), the site of the only known evidence of a dinosaur stampede on the planet. About 95 million years ago, herds of small two-legged dinosaurs came to drink at the lake when a huge carnivorous theropod set off a stampede, resulting in a mass of muddy footprints that have fossilised over time.

The Australian Age of Dinosaurs museum (australianageofdinosaurs.com), just outside of Winton, houses the largest collection of Australian dinosaur fossils in the world. We arrive too late in the day to take a tour of the Fossil Preparation Laboratory or Collection Room but we do a guided walk through Dinosaur Canyon. It features pathways that extend over the side of a flat-topped mesa called a “jump-up” into the gully below with spectacular views and life-size bronze reconstructions of the dinosaurs.

From Winton, the Outback Way continues towards Boulia and my preconceptions are slowly eroded with every kilometre. I'd always imagined the outback as a vast, featureless place but the landscape under the impossibly wide, blue skies is surprisingly varied, with plains of Mitchell and spinifex grasses, weather-carved gullies and mesas.

Here, the Outback Way follows the old Cobb & Co mail route through Middleton, one of the country's smallest towns (population of three) and home to one of Queensland's most isolated pubs. It's day two and still a little early for a beer when

I ask Middleton Hotel publican Les Cain if he and wife Val ever get lonely or bored out here. “Nah, mate,” he replies, “there's always someone passing through.”

Across the road is an example of typically droll outback humour, a sign pointing to the “Hilton Hotel” – “No aircon, no TV, no pool, no charge” – a dusty campground. We're pushing on to more salubrious digs, however.

Small and tidy Boulia, our stop for the night, boasts the famous Min Min lights phenomenon, balls of light first spotted over a grave behind the Min Min Hotel in the early 1890s. We check in to our accommodation and head straight for the Min Min Encounter Tourist Centre in the main street. It's kind of kitsch but fun, with animatronic characters Bluey and Mrs McGreedy describing their sightings.

The landscape beyond Boulia starts to change colour, deepening to the familiar red hue of the outback. The dirt is a fine powder that gets everywhere – even between your toes, despite boots and socks, I discover later.



The rugged beauty of the outback set against the vast blue sky (below)



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There's little fanfare as the Outback Way crosses the border into the Northern Territory a few hours later; on the Queensland side, it's marked by a handpainted tin sign. We farewell the tarmac to navigate bulldust-covered ruts that can break an axle (or worse) and dodge wildlife, both alive and dead. Startled mobs of head-bobbing emus race the car, threatening to cross in front of us before veering off into the scrub, while kangaroo carcasses stiffen in the sun, their flesh pulled and pecked by broad-winged birds of prey.

Day three is a long drive shared by all of us – nine hours to Alice Springs through flat, scrubby land punctuated by termite mounds taller than the Toyota. It's exhausting, even for the passengers, and we stop for a generous camp-oven dinner at Gemtree tourist park (gemtree.com.au). Feeling refreshed, we set off again beneath a night sky that looks like it's been sprinkled with glitter.

The Rainbow Valley Conservation Reserve, 97 kilometres from Alice, south of the MacDonnell Ranges, is best seen in the early morning or late afternoon as the sandstone bluffs and cliffs change colour. Our Indigenous guide, Ricky, calls out to his ancestors for permission to bring us to Wurre – as the reserve is known to the traditional owners, the Upper Southern Arrernte people – before leading our group through a rocky gully where he points out rock art, bush tucker, medicinal plants and the sharpened stone tool heads that litter the valley floor.

From Alice Springs, the Outback Way heads south, traversing a section of the Great Sandy Desert. Our accommodation on day six is country-casual glamping at Kings Creek (kingscreekstation.com.au), a cattle and camel station 260 kilometres from Yulara, near Uluru. We visit the camels, including calves with their supermodel eyelashes, then set up a table under the gums to toast the spectacular sunset with a glass of chardonnay.

(From top) A river on the Outback Way; Les Cain, Middleton Hotel publican; the Australian Age of Dinosaurs museum near Winton

With drought and fluctuating livestock prices, farmers in this remote part of Australia have had to diversify and tourism is now an important part of insuring against tough times. In the kitchen of the 404,685-hectare cattle station of Curtin Springs (curtinsprings.com), about an hour's drive from Yulara, Lyndee Severin – who's married to the owner's son, Ashley – pours us a cuppa and talks about the evolution of tourism here.

“When Ashley's parents, Peter and Dawn, came here in 1956, Uluru didn't exist as a tourist attraction,” she says. “That first year, just six people took the road down from Alice Springs, nine in the second year. In the late '50s, Len Tuit [considered the pioneer of Central Australian tourism] started taking organised tours from Alice to [Ayers] Rock and he would stop here for fuel and water. Eventually, Dawn and Peter said, ‘Why don't we make your guests a cup of tea and a scone?’”

Today, the station has a store, restaurant, fuel and accommodation and also offers walking tours to the nearby salt lakes. In 2014, the family business added another string to its bow – manufacturing artisan paper from grasses such as spinifex, kerosene and kangaroo, mixed with clay and native flowers collected on the property.

Visitors can join a papermaking workshop in what was once the abattoir or browse the gallery showcasing daughter Ameer's paper jewellery and contemporary sculpture.



Tips, tricks and hints

- The best time to travel the Outback Way is during the cooler months, April to October.
- If you don't want to travel alone or as part of an organised tag along tour, such as Travel West (travelwest.com.au), the Outback Way website (outbackway.org.au) has a noticeboard where you can see who else is doing the drive at the same time and travel together.

The glorious sunsets (above) herald nights lit by the glow of hurricane lamps (left)



A week after leaving Winton, I'm excited to finally see the famous rock come into view mid-morning. But as I grab my camera to snap it, the others laughingly tell me that's not it. Like many before me, I've been fooled by a pretender – Mount Conner. The real thing, Uluru, comes into sight at lunchtime and is magnificent.

Uluru's traditional owners ask visitors not to climb the sacred site but the 10-kilometre walk around the base is even better, taking in its many facets. Just before sunset, we join the vans and 4WDs, surrounded by multilingual conversations and photographers setting up tripods. Everyone is gathered to pay homage to nature's show as the rock changes colours under the last rays of the sun.

I'm relieved we've managed the drive without incident – not so much as a blown tyre. I feel more confident about handling a 4WD on unsealed roads and less apprehensive about the outback.

At the end of the trip, I'm both humbled and a little regretful. Humbled by the astounding natural beauty of the outback and regretful I was so busy seeing the rest of the world that I neglected to explore my own backyard. But after that long shortcut, it's better late than never. ●

The wide outback blue sky becomes inky black and awash with countless stars at night



Travel Insider

Want to keep moving? See our guide to driving and dining along the Great Ocean Road at travelinsider.qantas.com.au.

More Outback Way sights

Cawnpore Lookout Between Winton and Boulia, Cawnpore jump-up offers extraordinary views of the Lilleyvale Hills.

Geocaching The Outback Way is the world's longest geocache trail. Players use GPS coordinates to discover 34 hidden "treasures" along the route.

Movie-set miner's hut Take a short off-road track to see a replica of an old miner's hut outside Middleton, built as part of the set for the movie *Goldstone* filmed here in 2015.

Boulia Stone House A heritage-listed home dating from the 1880s, the immaculately preserved Stone House details the history and life of Boulia's early settlers and Aboriginal people.

Cultural tour Learn about Aboriginal arts and crafts, language, bush tucker and more with locals Christine Breden and Peter Abbott from Karrke (karrke.com.au) at the Kings Canyon National Park.

Gem fossicking Take a garnet or zircon fossicking tour at the Gemtree tourist park (gemtree.com.au) and have any "finds" appraised.

Trephina Gorge Nature Park There's a range of walks through and around this spectacular steep-walled gorge in the East MacDonnell Ranges (nt.gov.au).



GETTING THERE

QantasLink flies to Longreach from Brisbane, with additional connections. qantas.com

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