



*Figure 1 Road train. Beware!*

### **Desert Trip to Western Queensland 2018**

A window of opportunity opens for me to go back to the desert, this time to Innamincka in the Strzelecki Desert, South Australia. I have long wanted to visit the wildlife refuge at Coongie Lakes National Park where the bird life is prolific. So, camera packed, vehicle hired from Brisbane, bookings made. A mate comes along for the ride at the last minute and we are off. I'm glad Dean comes as the distances are huge and he is a bloody good driver and even better company..

We barrel out of Brisbane, admire Toowoomba and head for the interior. Through Dalby and St George to finally wind up in Cunnamulla, dodging road-killed roos along the way, a mere 790 kms inland.

Cunnamulla is a small dusty pastoral service town and government post in Western Queensland, pop 204. It has three pubs, two of which could do with a major spruce-up, an IGA store, a number of closed shops, the Shire HQ and Town Hall. We refuel and look for a place for dinner. Wallabies are mowing the school lawns in the dusk. A stroll around the town leads us to the Cunnamulla Boutique Hotel. It has table cloths on trestles and candles set out on the footpath alongside an empty road. The menu offers lamb shanks and chips and gravy.

Boutique has nice ring to it. The hotel has seen better days but it appears to be in the process of haphazard renovation. Wine bottles are stacked on the counter. You take what you want and pay for it at the end. All wine is \$19. The restaurant is large but has only six tables, the rest of the space being taken up by, well, stuff. Pots, old TVs, stack-a-chairs and tables, a workmate bench with a skillsaw. One wall has new white wallpaper. The rest is slowly peeling off redly under its own weight.

After forty minutes a second bottle of wine is under consideration. A blonde, chef's hat, apron and thongs, comes out to let us know that maybe another fifteen minutes and we'll be good to go. A middle-aged couple come into the dining room and sit down looking a little shell-shocked. They've booked into the hotel and have just seen their rooms. Disappointment is written strong on their faces. We let them settle down with a bottle of wine before we suggest they put their order in as we have waited an hour.

Good-News Bruce, in thongs, stubbies and yellow singlet comes out with our lamb shanks. He returns to the kitchen with the order from the new couple and returns back to chat while 'she' does the cooking. I refrain from asking what further cooking is needed for lamb shanks and mashed spud, given that the shanks would have taken four hours to cook. We eye the expensive Bose sound system mounted high in the walls and suggest Bruce put on some music for us. He scratches his head and says no worries. Over at the counter he tinkers for ten minutes or so and then disappears back into the kitchen. He returns with an iPhone in his hand with country music playing on it. He plonks it down on our table and says, there you go, mate. Music! Bruce is very pleased with himself.

Well, the lamb shanks are as tasty as they are anywhere in the outback, where people live on them with the occasional Beef Schnitty thrown in. Mind you, we are midway into a second bottle of shiraz which is beginning to go down remarkably well.

The next morning the tables are still set for candle-lit dinners, a siren song for lost dreams and blighted ambitions of the new owners. Bruce is out in the street, broom in hand, fag on lower lip. He waves to us as old friends.

Tough town, Cunnamulla. There is a large police base with twenty two police living inside a high electric fence with razor wire, and what appears to be a no-go area on the other side of town. Mind you, the next police station is Thargomindah, a couple of hundred clicks away. We say goodbye to the school's family of little lawnmowers working the morning shift and hit the road. We refuel at Thargomindah on the banks of the muddy Bulloo and fly down the single lane tar seal until it becomes a sandy track a hundred metres wide. A vehicle every thirty minutes is about average.

While much of Western Queensland is dry and prone to drought there are big differences in the vegetation. Much of the land is savannah with clumps of grass, mostly native mitchell grass and small shrubs with a canopy of mulga. Mulga is also suitable for grazing and cattle will get by on it during a drought, but they won't thrive without mitchell grass which lives for thirty years and depends on grazing or fire for regeneration.

As we drive further west, the land becomes more open and the vista wider until it is 360 degrees and flat. The mulga becomes less dominant and spinifex rings take over the desert. Livestock will feed on this at a pinch. And then we reach the gibber plains, also known as desert pavement, with tiny rocks interlocked to form an impervious shiny surface that glitters iron-redly in the sun. Where there is a depression there is scattered scrub and spinifex. The dry gullies host taller shrubs which can dig their roots down to the water table. Every now and then a ghost gum will advertise the availability of water. Roos are smaller and cattle are counted by the square mile per head. The blue above and the red desert stretches forever. The massive soundlessness of it all. This is what I've come for.



*Figure 2 Gibber Plains*

We slowly descend from the gibber plains to meet the yellow sand country, flat and easily flash flooded, with small gums in the largest depressions. In the distance a line of trees identify an intermittent stream bed, beyond which there is an abrupt lack of vegetation other than spinifex. We spy a water tower, the first settlement for 350 kms.

Noccundra, on the banks of the Wilson River, has a population of three, comprising the publican, his wife and his daughter. Built in 1868 in the Strzelecki Desert by Cobb and Co, it has served beer

continuously ever since. The building is made of sturdy sandstone blocks brought in by camel train from Mt Pool in NSW, 180km away. Noccundra was laid out as a town to serve Nockatunga Station, which also still exists today, but it's now a one-building dust town. Drought reduced the town to a watering hole for animals and people whose aim is to overnight at the billabong, have a few beers and refuel for the trip to Windorah. Road trains billow their dust every hour or so. Public showers provide brownish water with proceeds to the Royal Flying Doctor Service. They are in steady use as there must be around fifty camp-sites occupied.

Unfortunately there is no diesel available here due to a pump failure. Nearest fuel south is Lyndhurst, 366 km away. The owners don't seem perturbed by this. The pump part will turn up in its own time, and in the meantime there is the camp ground by the river and people will have to wait. We are thankful we filled up in Thargomindah and have enough to get to Innamincka with a reasonable safety margin.

You can often tell how a business is going by its rules. In the case of Noccundra there are RULES as to what can and cannot be done. Some are unwritten by the owners such as when they will serve meals, and at what time. They are not at all pleased to have fourteen people turn up for dinner, even though they all buy steak and have several bottles of wine between them. The owner seems disenchanted with the pub life and I think would sell tomorrow if he could find a buyer. Or today. When people who make a living from the hospitality industry lose interest in their customers, those customers begin to sense it and the slope is slippery. Trip Advisor starts to report that all is not well, and the slope steepens. Pity. The building is knock-down stunning, and even a coffee cart would prosper from July to October. We spend an uncomfortable noisy night in substandard dongas, the universal workers' cabins, alongside the generator which stays on all night in case we want to read.

Back up on the gibber plains on another cloudless day, shiny towers shimmer in the desert light like a mirage. After an age we come upon an oil field, and later several gas fields with their pipelines running down to Adelaide, their camps self-contained, their airstrips close by for the fifty seaters that fly workers in and out.



Billara Gas Field Strzelecki Desert

We descend to the sandy desert with its gullies and washouts. It almost never rains here, but water from the north floods its way through the Channel Country until it evaporates in the desert heat. Rows of gum trees outline the dry-river banks. A large sign welcomes careful drivers to South Australia. Forty five kilometres on we see a shimmer of settlement in the distance. We have reached Innamincka, perched above the permanent water of Cooper Creek, an inland waterway that starts way up in the Channel Country above Windorah and empties out into the Strzelecki Desert.

Dry as dust and a long way from the sea, in fact about as far as you can get. Innamincka has population of thirty, but many more in the tourist season. Next fuel is back in Thargomindah 450km to the east, Lyndhurst 470km to the south, and Birdsville, 390km to the north west.

I have long wanted to come here as it is one of the really isolated places in Australia that I've not yet visited. Concerned about accommodation I've emailed ahead by three months. No worries, returns Clinton. Just fix us up when you get here, mate.



'Here' is a tiny settlement in the Strzelecki Desert with a fuel depot, a shop, a pub and a couple of rows of streets with isolated houses straggled out. They are all painted in a washed-out yellow. I am excited to be here. We arrive at the Trading Post. Clinton looks at me and says so you'll be Peter, I reckon. He puts us into two dongas, which are twenty-foot containers, each with a broad roof to give shelter from the sun. They are well fitted-out with two single beds, ensuite and an air conditioner. Perfect for three nights. Good camp kitchen as well, paella tonight.

A large generator runs the village power. We ask about the brand new power lines coming into town. Answer? Well it depends. Cost \$800 million to build a geothermal power station by drilling deep, as in really deep, into the ground to pick up the heat and then pump water into it from Cooper Creek to make steam. On opening day the plant shit itself and the makers walked away with the 800 mill and a lot of others out of pocket big-time, without a single watt generated. Been hushed up, as it was 'only a trial to see if it would work.' Result is new power lines but still diesel generators. We wonder why the town is not surrounded by solar panels.

The people at the Innamincka Hotel are very friendly and have Coopers and XXXX on tap at reasonable prices, given the distance from the breweries. Whilst things in Innamincka are expensive in Brisbane terms, they are still not as expensive as NZ. Steak is \$10 a kilo, wine of good quality is \$20 and a proper pint is \$9. It takes less than five minutes to see the town, but a very pleasant couple of hours can be spent from the bar watching the comings and goings. Grey nomads comprise ninety per cent of the traffic from July to October and Inna is one of the places nomads just have to visit, some of them many times. Believe it or not it is an extremely handy junction of roads to the interior and especially to NT and Alice Springs via the Simpson Desert. The range of caravans and camper trailers is enormous with every conceivable combination from high-end super-4WD trailers, to doing-it-staunch swags on top of roof racks. Not nearly so much of a range of vehicles, though. V8 Toyota Landcruisers rule the outback almost without exception. People emerge from their red dust caked vehicles to refuel their wagons while others stretch and head for the toilets and showers across the way.

Shopping completed, vehicles are parked loosely in the sand while all make for the bar for lunch and a cold drink. It is cold in the sun, with a chilly wind. People wear hats and jackets but thongs remain the footwear of choice. Convoys of travellers throng the tables and catch up on their day. Soon they



will set up camp on the Town Common, a camp ground on either side of the Cooper River, red gums and vast ghost gums providing speckled shelter in the sand. If there is anything that has not been invented by Aussies for the camping lark I do not know what it would be. They have every possible device to make their camping lives easier. Some set-ups are truly impressive. Convoys park in a circle with all the living done in the middle, the number plates from all corners of Australia, meeting up each year for months in the desert outback. A way of life to be envied.

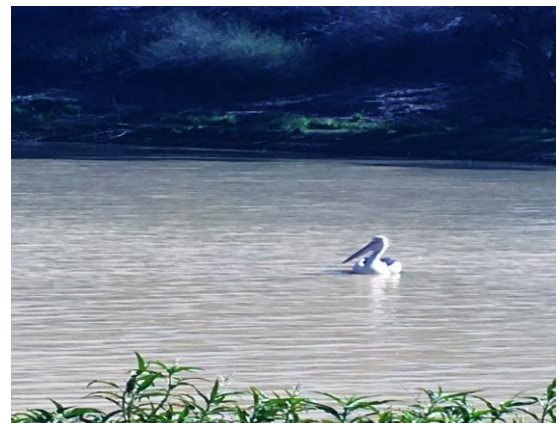
Sadly, floods have prevented us going to Coongie Lakes, the real purpose of the trip, but we have to make the best of it and tour the desert nearby. Today the cool breeze keeps the flies at bay, so time for a little history starting with the 1860s expedition by Burke and Wills to traverse Australia.

A good walk along the heavy sand on the banks of Cooper Creek leads to Burke's grave, who died with bush tucker all around him but refused to eat what the locals thrived on. It is a lonely place, a stone marker, giant red gums waving their mottled green leaves in the breeze. I sit for a while, brushing flies away. A wedge-tailed buzzard wafts effortlessly high above the billabong. A score of correllas squawk whitely against the ever-blue above me. Pelicans drift down stream and then turn upwind for a little paddle—a slight bow-wave on the lookout for fish. Fish bones and the remains of a dozen yabbies by an old campfire. A turtle suns itself on a log, ready to flop into the water should an eagle come into sight.

Mankind has camped permanently alongside this river and lived well for a hundred thousand years but Burke thought he knew better. The original owners have drifted elsewhere, doubtless to lesser fortunes. Now, everything needed by mankind to survive in the Strzelecki apart from water comes in by road train.



*Figure 3 Burke's Grave*



Discovery that mitchell grass makes excellent tucker for livestock led to pastoral grazing in 1890 and the establishment of Innamincka. It grew as a customs post for SA, taxing cattle as they were driven 1200 miles down to Adelaide from Queensland. There was a police post, customs post, wheelwright, hospital, church and of course a pub which served bottled beer.

After the federation of the colonies in 1907 there was no longer the need for a customs post and the town slowly died. In the seventies the school closed, followed by the police post and finally the hotel, leaving a midden of broken bottle a hundred metres long. The discovery of oil and gas brought new life to the town. While the oil and gas field camps are largely self-sufficient, there is a need for contractors to stay over and a new hotel was reconstructed over the old in the mid-eighties, followed by the Trading Post and engineering services for the oil and gas industry. Some of the locals are critical of the FIFO system whereby camps are self-sufficient, even to the point of their

own bars, but others point to the newly sealed roads and vastly improved satellite communication built to serve these industries.

In the meantime I suspect the cattle stations quietly go about their business. The seven year drought appears to be over for this part of the Strzelecki Desert and cattle are in surprisingly good nick. It is reputed that stocking rates might get up to a bullock and a half per square mile if things continue on the up and up.

The tourist season lasts from July to early October and then things go very quiet, so right now the locals are going for it lickety split. Tonight is a buffet: lamb shanks, curried sausages, fish bites, three veggies and salad, and apple crumble. We can cook tomorrow. One of the women serving behind the bar is Malaysian. The young woman at the counter of the Trading Post is Swedish, a couple of the blokes are Scotties, a regular UN on OE. All wear smiles. A dozen languages in the big dining area speak the common tongue of breaking bread together. The campground has emptied out for the buffet.

Floods have closed the road from Inna to Birdsville. This is a big problem for those attending the Big Bash music festival at Big Red Dune near Birdsville. Inna is chock full of families headed for the event, mostly from Sydney and Brisbane. They camp on the Town Common half a click out of town along the Cooper Creek. There is a rumour that the road to Windorah via Cordillo Downs may open tomorrow so they all pack up and queue for diesel at the Trading Post which opens at 8am. This is a lengthy detour to Birdsville, but at least it will get them there. We hear later that the queue for diesel at Windorah was a kilometre long as everyone geared up to go down through the Diamantina Track to Birdsville.

Contrast the service at Noccundra with the outgoing friendly people at Innamincka and you have a lesson in tourism. Be nice to people, they will reward you with their custom and they will tell others there is a must-see place deep in the middle of nowhere. Promote it, live up to expectations and they will come. Well done Clint and Pei at the Innamincka Trading Post. They have made the most of a waterhole and a fuel tank, and the hotel next door even manages a smile when someone from Victoria asks if the barramundi is fresh. After all we are only 1500 kilometres from the sea.

It is time to head for new arid pastures, so we turn northeast to the desert fringe of Eromanga. The grasses and mulga shrubs become more frequent along the dry gullies, and every now and then water sits alongside the floodways. The clouds we saw far away to the north were heavy. It has been raining. Long horn cattle ignore us as they cross the tracks, calves at foot staying very close to mum.



Scott has lived in Eromanga all his life apart from a stint in Charleville for ten years. He has come home to take over the pub from his dad who was also born here. Scott lost his wife recently but has stayed on at the Royal. He went to high school in Brizzie, got the train from Quilpie which doesn't go

now. Neither do any passenger trains, even from Charleville. Only coal now and that's slowed with the downturn.

Yeah, the roads are good up here, mate. All due to Joh Petersen, Premier of Queensland and an outback boy from round here—looked after the outback, mate, especially when the oil was found here in the eighties, so you can easily forgive Joh for the odd rort. Place went mad. Wells everywhere, Queensland self-sufficient for fuel. Australia too? Not too sure about that, mate. Never been there.

Anyway, oil got going real good, being sent all over Queensland from the refinery right here in Ero. Still working. Crude so sweet you can run heavy machinery straight out of the bore, and any older diesel engine. Here, smell this. Yep, smells like strong diesel all right. That's what it is. Then those bastards from BP set the sulphur content for diesel fuel all over Australia, and set it just a bit lower than our diesel sulphur levels. Course IOC could have refined it to meet the standard, but then the price of oil dropped and it wasn't worth it, so now they sell all their fuel to the mining companies for heavy machinery and generators. Yeah, bunch of bastards, B P. Anyway all the oil fields you would of seen down Innamincka way are on the go-slow until prices come up again. Rest of Australia gets all its fuel from Singapore.

Work? Well, there's the refinery and the oil and gas fields but that means you have to live in camps for a big part of the time and not everyone wants to do that. Road trains always need drivers but that's not everyone's cup of tea. Away for days on end. Cattle stations have contracting work but most of them only need workers during the big stuff like mustering and fencing lines, especially dingo fences—they're all the go at the minute. Des is a local cocky. He'll be in later. He'll tell you all about it. Dinner? Well wouldn't go past the lamb shanks, most people will tell ya.

All this from Scottie who runs a bloody good pub with excellent accommodation and a great set up. Lounge chairs and sofas along the open verandah and a large shady kitchen loaded with breakfast tucker. An ancient TK Bedford 7 tonner out the back short of everything except its shape. Correllas in the trees and roos poking around in the dusk. A brolga walks across the main road which is wide as a footie field, and someone shoos a couple of emus out of their front yard.

The lamb-shanks are enormous and the chips and gravy are of the same unique quality available anywhere in Queensland. Alongside us is a family of four kids and mum and dad. They have flown all the way up from Sydney and are heading to the Big Bash. They have all their camping gear in the Cessna Caravan and have taken a stop-over in Eromanga in their stride.

Des is a stocky cocky and might have been Southern European once. His hands are hard and his face is weathered almost black from the sun. Stubbies, of course, and his acknowledgement of a cold winter is a cap and woolly socks inside his joddies. Yeah, you're right, mate, it is sheep country really but the fucken dogs get 'em. Up to fifty percent of the lambs go to the bastards. Hardly makes it worth-while having sheep. Real shame cause there's always a little bit of water round here even in a ten year drought but there you go. This year we'll do another hundred kilometres of vermin-proof fence. You'll see it on your way out to Windorah. Soon as we get a bit of fence up we drive the dingos towards it and blow them away. Yeah, some of them can be big, mate and clever with it.

Yeah, had a good bit of rain the last few weeks, still sitting around and the air is cold so you don't get too much evaporation. Course, you only need four inches in a month and you've got a 100,000 acres flooded and that's when you get ten-year grass. Times like that you could fatten fifty thousand cattle if you could find them. As it is we've got drought all the way down past the NSW border and past that even.

Yeah, been so dry me and my brother who lives over the other side of the place had to start selling off our breeding cows and no cocky likes to do that, but you gotta pay the bills sooner or later. A muster means choppers, me brother's microlight and fuel and musterers. A muster costs around 10 K a shot and we shift cattle five times a year to new paddocks, so there's 50 K. A deck of good breeding cows with calf at foot will give you 60 K, so a six-deck train will give you 360 K and out a that comes the freight, fuel, fencing, power and something to live on, but trouble is you haven't got as many cows any more so you gotta start all over again. So me and my brother, we're going all-out to fence the whole two hundred thousand acres and get back to sheep, good wool around 30 microns and good prices for sheep meat.

Yeah, I'll have another beer thanks, mate. So you come from over Innamincka way then? Course it's all company grazing down there. Truck 'em down in convoys—thirty or forty trains at a time from NT. Take 'em down there to fatten them up on the mitchell grass and then take 'em off to the feed lots for finishing. Big business.

So you come from North Island you say? Yeah, been there couple of times. Nice. Bit small, but. Wouldn't suit. Good stockmen though, ones we met up Taihape way. Wouldn't mind a couple hundred thousand of those acres up here in the Strez, but. Yeah, there's a few kiwis driving road trains out here. Good workers, see 'em in here every now and then. Not like those kiwis down in the cities. Trash, mate, no offence.

Jeez! Don't talk to me about bloody government. Useless pricks down Brizzie on me back about the half yearly station report. Supposed to keep a record of stock and visitors coming to my place and account for their actions. How the hell do I do that when I've got a main fucken road going through my place plus three other roads? Still I'm supposed to account for them so this fucken pen-pusher says. Last week we had more than twenty road trains go through with some-one else's stock on them. And they tell me they have the power to prosecute me if I don't fill in their bloody forms.

Another thing. People got it wrong about not being able to work in the summer. Gotta rule from Brizzie that says a man's gotta lay down his tools if it gets over 40 degrees! So whattaya gonna do about the cattle then? Just leave em with no grass or water? Can ya imagine the fucken Greenies goin on at ya then! Wouldn't last a day in our heat, useless tits the lot of em. That's one thing I agree with Pauline Hansen.

So, come summer heat we work the stock at night. Get em up early and plod em along to the next block. They'll graze around until mid-morning and then find a spot to hunker down in the mulga. We do the same and then on we go the next night. Same as the stockies in the road trains. Cart cattle at night in summer otherwise most of em would be dead in the heat. And the drivers for that matter. Yep, since Joh went we've had nothin but bloody bureaucrats running Queensland. Whole place goin to the fucken dogs. Even tried to give us an extra hour of daylight in the fucken summer! Yeah, well you might be able to fool those cockies down the road in NSW, but you're not gonna fool us here in Queensland trying to save fucken daylight.

All this in a wondrous Queensland drawl. Laconic with little cadence, and achieved entirely without moving the lips. We retire to our dongas. The night air is cold and the stars without number. On this Sunday evening the town is deeply silent and only the Royal has its lights on. Sofas and chairs line the verandah along the full length of the pub. Yeah, people come in to shelter and have a few beers in the summer. How hot? Well, it nudged 48 this summer. Forty-eight degrees! A dog barks. Dog or dingo?



Eromanga! Don't miss it if you're up this way. It's only five hours from Innamincka and three from Windorah, or twenty hours from the coast. Worth a visit. Got an excellent local museum, keys from the pub and a great video outlining the town and its surrounds. Really well done. Also, a few clicks out of town is a fine dinosaur museum which contains the remains of Cooper, the world's largest titannosaurus, plus lots of bones from giant marsupial bears, all found around Eromanga, which used to be the swampy Eromanga Sea, an inland sea larger than the Baltic. Unfortunately for the dinosaurs the Great Dividing Range was created by volcanic eruptions which tilted Australia up from its eastern side and sealed off the inlets from the Pacific. Over time the water evaporated and the climate changed the vegetation from lush woodland to desert. Only kangaroos and a few lizards survived.

The next morning is cloudless and chilly. On the road to Windorah we try to imitate the Queensland drawl with hilarious results. We pass Des' boundary 45 km up the track. There is a brand new dingo fence that has trapped a few dozen emus with nowhere to go. Three dead dingos hang off a post. Left for the crows. Dingo Des has been on the job.



Heading for Blackall around 500 km away, we cut through the dusty Channel Country for a few hours and then turn off towards the east for the first time. This is sand country with a zillion dry channels that fill when it rains and then dry out again. The vegetation is mulga and spinifex, and there are more and more outcrops of rocky promontories. Three hundred kms in we reach Yaraka, the sole sun-bleached settlement on the track, a chance for fuel and grub. Yaraka was once the end of the line for the rail from Blackall. It was to have gone to Windorah at one time but it only got as far as here. Channel country, with its sand and waterways and braids meant that too many bridges had to be built and maintained. Then the whole line was closed down and that was it. Now, Yaraka has a population of 18, including the policeman. School closed in '98. New people have taken on the General Store and Post Office—bare boards that show the sand beneath, a new coffee machine which we make thankful use of, and a sparse range of usefuls for the station community that come into town every now and then. And of course, a pub.

Gerry and Chris are the owners. They had big ideas which have gotten smaller as the truth of Yaraka's isolation creeps in. Still, you blokes dropped in for lunch and a beer, says Gerry, and there's more grey nomads stopping off at the caravan park, so who knows. They are friendly and have out-of-town accents, and posh with it. They are heading off to Longreach three hours away to meet friends, leaving the place to Johnno and Joanne, two drifters who washed up in Yaraka last August after a spell of dingo fencing down Eromanga way. Johnno is happy to yak and does so fluently. We learn about the good things that go on in this part of the outback, the general disdain for people over the Divide. When the drought comes everything else dries up as well, including the money, and so fencing is not on the agenda for some time to come, so Johnno and Joanne are giving lookin' after pubs a go just for a change. Twenty-four foot caravan out the back and an ageing Land Cruiser, no

mortgage and no hurry in life. Another ten years of this in the Channel Country and they'll probably end up in Longreach or Blackall to retire to a caravan park. Don't forget to tell people about Yaraka Hotel, mate.



Unbelievably I find it on Trip Advisor and give it five rings. At \$3.50 a night or \$15 a week you get a shady campsite, showers, power and cooking facilities, an artificial lawn with shade, cold beer and good food. That's \$180 for three months for a couple of nomads going nowhere slowly. Yaraka appeared to be flyshit on the map when we first looked at it. We left it with respect for people who choose to make a go of it in Western Queensland. Good luck to them.

Blackall turns out to be an unattractive fly-blown mining town, even though it is the place with the Black Stump, so we carry down the main highway to Tambo for the night. Comfortable motels and camping ground. Our rooms are next to a police 4X4 so we behave ourselves. Tambo is a nice pastoral service town with around a dozen streets. People are friendly and say giddyay. The Tambo Tavern is run by Kerri—in her fifties, a smoker with gravel voice and chewing gum. Great smile. Came here from Charters Towers once she got over the cancer. Always been on her bucket list, running a pub. Been here six years and thinking about moving on. Set up the cricket club, take them all in my bus down as far as Quilpie to play. Quilpie is six hours away. An extra-large colour photo of the Tambo Cricket Team 2016 hangs in the bar. She's been as far south as Roma, not intending to go past, either.

Kerri doesn't go for Victorians that much. Mind you no-one in Queensland does, with their hair in bobs and turned up collars and posh accents and makeup on before breakfast, and asking you if the barra is fresh, and don't you have any Victorian wine, and taking the toilet rolls with them, and wanting two for one meals. All this while serving us Gold XXXX and looking after the TAB.

If you're staying for dinner, mate, you'll wanna have the T Bone. Kerri does the best T bone around, says Sandy, a red headed freckled sunburned bloke in his thirties, dazzle shirt on, white hardhat at his side. Doesn't get any better than her T bones, mate and tell you what you'll know you're full after it. Sandy and his sidekick Donna work in road construction and they're having a quick beer before heading home. Donna sinks a few quick ones and leaves just as Mandy comes in. Mandy sits with Sandy, calls for a cider and picks up a conversation that we've not been having. Yep, those bloody dogs have got to go. God knows what we will go through come lambing. Trouble is lots of them look like cattle dogs and you don't know whether to kill them or not. People say they can't cross with a cattle dog but I've seen one that I could a swore was a bloody border collie. Border fucken collie!

Stan has been sitting at the bar saying nothing for all the time we've been there. Course they bloody cross with dingos, no matter what they say. Any dog without a collar should be a dead one. Ten eighty's the only way if you want sheep up here these days. Ten eighty, I say. Yeah, you blokes from

New Zealand should know all about that. Picked the accent straight off. Used to be one myself forty years ago. Marton. Left the family there. Never went back. Good riddance on both sides.

You better watch yourself, Stan, me and Mandy might get you deported back to Newe Zoiylan for bad character, so reckon it must be your shout.

Kerri asks if she can get out for a smoke so we all fill up before she goes. Oldest trick in the book, winks Mandy. She turns on the heat pump. Getting bloody cold at nights now. Would ya believe it gets below freezing right here in Tambo. Never happened before. Ice on me bloody fences, I tell ya. She gets out her phone and brings it over to me. Look at that! Bloody ice on me fences. And see that! Bloody dingo prints alongside the leaner post. Bastards run up the leaner post to jump a fucken dingo fence.

Mandy and Sandy are married and have a farm out on the Springsure Road. She works two days a week at the primary school and farms the rest of the time. After they have gone, Kerri tells us she took them right up the Main Street from the church in her Mustang, which was another bucket list tick, and did a burnout right in front of the pub. Got pulled up by the cops, never got charged but! Had the wedding breakfast right here. Everybody came.

Kerri's daughter is a thirty year old dead ringer for her mother, takes over the bar so mum can do the cookin'. Yeah that burnout bought the house down all right, finishing Kerri's sentence. T-bones'll be ready in an hour. 'Nother beer, boys? The t-bones are huge and the dining room is full. The hour's wait gives time for a bottle of shiraz to empty nicely in anticipation. Dean waits a long time for an espresso flat white and pronounces it the worst in Australia.

We are getting closer to civilisation than we intended so next morning detour to Springsure, 245 km over sand tracks. It turns out to be our greatest experience. We drive past Sandy and Mandy's farm and out over sandy tracks for nearly three hours before seeing another vehicle. This is gum country and some of it holds good grazing. Cattle-stops every twenty kms or so and every fifty km a new station sign. Castlevale is one of these, 55 km from Killarney Park and 42 km from Semper Idem. It runs Santa Gertruda cattle in the main by the looks of it which are thriving on the gum lands. The track takes us through rocky outcrops and we climb up through and over the Great Dividing Range—an outstanding remote landscape. Great red volcanic lava plugs rear up sheer, out of the gumtrees, all that is left after the rest has eroded away. Deep valleys with tiny pools feed fish that only breed when the rains come. The smell of gum everywhere. The sound of crows from shaded lookouts. Flies.



An hour past Castlevale we meet up with a road train billowing dust. We pull well over and wait, reckoning they will travel in threes. Nope. This lot travel in sixes, plus one later on trying to catch

up. They would have left Springsure well before sunrise even to get this far. The dust chokes on in the still air before we are game to venture on.



If you have the time, spend a day or three on the Dawson Development Road from Tambo to Springsure. The landscape is spectacular with narrow ravines and steep cliffs and mile upon mile of gums growing close together. The contrast with the desert is stark where mile upon mile of nothingness is interspersed with the odd mulga tree which sits up on the landscape for an age before you get to it.

In all our 3500kms we met only friends, from shopkeepers to bar staff, to other travellers along the tracks. Even the family at Noccundra had their friendly ways, so long as we agreed with them. The grey nomads were all waves and smiles, and no-one lets you pass without a giddyay. Queenslanders are also considerate drivers.

Western Queensland also has its harsh side, with roadside cattle and roos rotting on the roadside from one-sided fights with road trains in the night. No-one else drives at night. As my mate says, not an easy trip to take with a grand-daughter.

So, as I write this, I raise a glass to the outback Queenslander. A dinkum Aussie, no nonsense, friendly and more relaxed than we are by a country mile. A hundred thousand acre stare in their eyes, battling with their country to eke a living from it. I also raise a glass to the burning memory of the Strzelecki Desert's shiny gibber plains and everything that grows there. I've been lucky enough to have been back in the desert to appreciate once more what a truly big sky looks like. I would go back in a heart-beat.

Peter Dale  
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