

Driving on a dirt road to nowhere. No worries, mate, it's the perfect antidote to big-city stress.

# GOING OUTBACK

It's a land of extremes: blinding heat, creeks with no water, thousands of flies and a rugged and often otherworldly landscape. **But there is also an immensely beautiful nothingness.** Sandra Carpenter travels into the heart of Australia to discover the true character of the remote outback.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT CORKERY



Clockwise from left: From the strange beauty of a boab tree to charming black-footed rock wallabies in Simpsons Gap and terror-striking road signs along the way, the outback is never boring. Abandoned cars are common, desert flowers less so as they occur more typically after a rain. Golf is played in the desert without the benefit of grass in Coober Pedy, giving the game a rather stark new look. Meanwhile, soaring eagles often mean roadkill nearby, and the town sign for Glendambo states the obvious about flies.



**N**o road is visible in front of me – only air. And as I turn slowly around, I realize I can no longer see the road behind me either. The immense quiet is broken only by the sounds of parrots, the engine laboring and my sharp intake of breath. My palms are sweating, and I notice that I am holding my breath as our four-wheel drive vehicle precariously hangs on top of the heavily rutted razor-back ridge of a road. Somehow I feel that not all four tires are on the ground.

Then magically, we lurch over the crest of the hill, hesitating for a long moment, before we make it over the hump and I can see down the road again. Simultaneously, I let out a yell of equal parts relief and exhilaration and high-five Jason, my brother-in-law, sitting in the back seat.

My driver-husband Robert needs both hands to navigate us along the steep 25-degree grade, so he doesn't participate in my victory celebration. With his typical Australian understatement, he casually remarks, "That was a beautiful piece of road."

Road? Not hardly. We are on a roller-coaster ride of a four-wheel drive track called the Echo Camp Backtrack deep in the heart of the Northern Flinders Ranges in South Australia. And the drive just started.

Four-wheel drive tracks such as this one in the rugged mountains of the Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary are just part of what makes up that vast expanse of land called the outback. When you get down to it, it's difficult to specifically define what or where the outback is. Technically speaking, outback refers to the remote, arid areas in the center of the continent. And since less than 10 percent of the population lives outside the urban areas on the coasts, it's not that hard to feel removed from civilization there, especially since the space covers some 6.5 million square kilometers of land and is inhabited by less than 60,000 people.

**MY FASCINATION WITH THE OUTBACK** began long before I met and married my husband. Instead, it formed with the 1980s miniseries *The Thorn Birds* when I fell in love with the sweeping landscape on the TV screen. As an overly romantic teenager growing up in the USA, I wanted to be heroine Meggie Cleary, living on a remote sheep station somewhere in the outback, marrying the ruggedly handsome stockman Luke, while secretly in love with the unobtainable Father Ralph. I had to go there.

It would be two decades before I made my first trip to the outback, fondly also referred to as "the back of beyond," "woop woop," "back of Bourke" and even the land "beyond the black stump." I am driving from New South Wales with Robert, my father-in-law Kevin and Jason in a rented four-wheel drive. Our truck is so high off the ground, I must leap to get into it, and it comes complete with a snorkel to navigate through flooded creek crossings, a ladder to the luggage rack on top and

a roo bar on the front. All of which is super-cool gear to a city girl.

After driving for two days, mostly on bumpy dirt roads, I begin to get a feel for the outback landscape and say so to my fellow travelers. To which Kevin replies that we are not in the outback yet. As a "bushie" (translation: outdoorsman) who has traveled extensively through the outback doing survey work for 30 years, he has specific ideas about what constitutes the outback.

"Dirt roads. No fences. No telephone lines," he says in a slow, gravelly drawl. "You see those fences there? That means we're not in the outback yet."

As we turn off the highway (dirt road) onto yet another dirt road from Yunta toward Arkaroola, we see a procession of warning signs. "Warning – Road Conditions" announces the first, then details further dangers, letting us know the road is open now but could easily and quickly become impassable. Another sign says there will be no services for the next 400 kilometers, so we must have spare tires and enough water and food to last for several days. In the event of a breakdown, we were to absolutely not leave the vehicle.

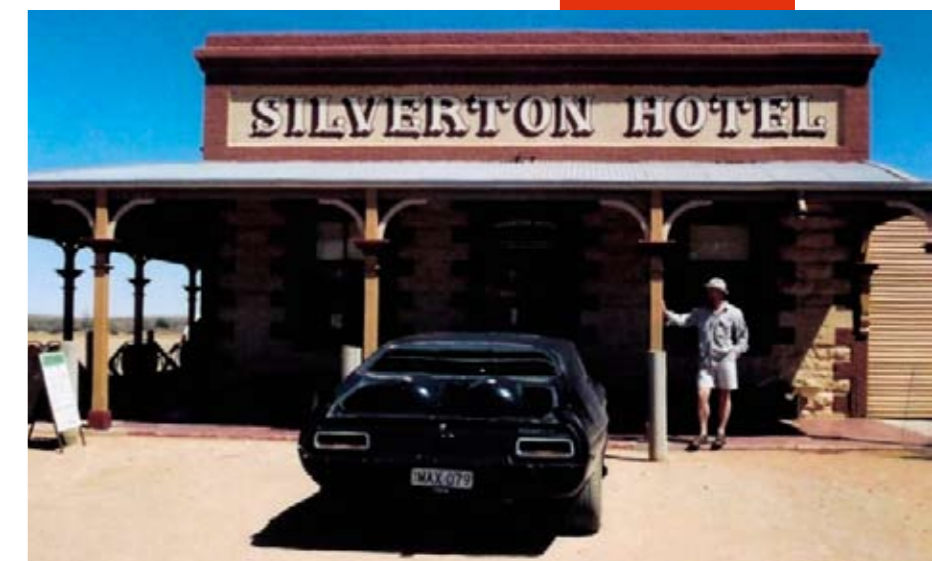
**NOW THIS IS THE OUTBACK** I have been waiting for. Dramatic stuff. We pass one vehicle in eight hours. Even Kevin finally admits that we are now deep in the outback.

The silence is powerful. It's immense, mind-boggling even. But also very calming and spiritual. No buildings, no houses, no cars. Nothing can be seen for miles in any direction except for the ranges looming in the distance. Eagles circle a dead kangaroo alongside the road and tell me that someone has driven this road sometime within the last day or so. As the sun begins to set, the Flinders become more beautiful, turning a lovely shade of purple against the blue and pink sky.

At Arkaroola, we are 100 kilometers from the nearest small town and 640 kilometers north of Adelaide. We are surrounded by rugged mountains,

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Outback pubs such as this one in Silverton provide cold beer, a meal and great photo opportunities, as evidenced by the car left behind from the filming of *Mad Max 2*.





**“It’s good here. Places like this sort the idiots out. The idiots can’t handle it here. It’s too hard.”**

No, you are not looking at the moon, but the Breakaways outside of Coober Pedy. Ancient seabeds formed the alien look of the landscape here.

Living underground is a way of life in Coober Pedy. A subterranean home provides an escape from the extreme heat, as well as a cozy way of life.



towering granite peaks, magnificent gorges and water holes. Beautiful parrots are commonplace as well as the endangered rock wallaby (a small kangaroo). As we switch to a plane and fly a small Cessna over nearby Lake Frome – a salt lake the size of the Netherlands that has filled to capacity only three times in the last 150 years – we witness the immensity of the landscape on a greater scale. In the sunshine, the lake is so white and bright that it’s difficult to look at without squinting, even with sunglasses.

**LEAVING THE FLINDERS** and our four-wheel drive behind, we turn to the tourist track outback. Driving the two-wheel-drive Mitsubishi rental car makes me feel like I am cheating the experience. But we are driving to the accessible outback from Adelaide in South Australia via the paved Stuart Highway.

Every direction I look, the land is flat, covered

with spinifex – tough outback grass – and nothing else. The landscape doesn’t change for hours on end. But it’s not boring. During the night, it rains and the desert landscape changes color. The spinifex is shades of green ranging from soft gray to brilliant yellow and provides a striking contrast with the red, sandy earth. Nature’s palette is spectacular here, particularly when you mix in that particular blue sky that’s so typical of these parts of the outback.

**THE MIND-NUMBING HEAT** of my previous trips to the outback is a distant memory as it’s autumn in the southern hemisphere and the temperature is 35 degrees Celsius. As we drive, I realize that there are some constants that you can count on in the outback. Namely, the distance between towns is always long, and you have to fill your gas tank when you can because it may be hours before you see another station. Roadhouses – restaurant/pubs filled with friendly locals drinking ice-cold beer at the bar and looking like they belong on a cowboy movie set – are your desert oasis. As I drink a schooner (pint) of beer at the Kulgera Roadhouse, I ask the cook about life there.

“It’s good here. Places like this sort the idiots out. The idiots can’t handle it here. It’s too hard.”

We drive carefully past a road train – these are trucks with two or three normal trailers attached, in lengths up to 53.5 meters – transporting cattle. There are more cows on the road than cars. But we see plenty of abandoned cars alongside the road, left behind five, 10, 40 years ago. With the nearest service center many, many kilometers away, it’s cheaper to leave a car behind than tow it.

Another outback truth I discover is that creeks and lakes typically do not have water in them. The quiet of the road is interrupted by a willy-willy – a small dust tornado – and we enjoy its appearance from nowhere. I find the most common outback residents are flies. Getting out of the car near Woomera to take a photo, I am immediately covered with at least 100 flies, maybe more. They are relentless in buzzing my face, going up my nose and in my ears. I try the “Aussie salute” for a while – vainly waving my arms to send them on their way. But it’s only in the car that I get a reprieve.

**IN THE LATE AFTERNOON**, we arrive in Coober Pedy, the opal mining capital of the world. Aboriginal

for “white man in a hole” or “white fellow’s hole in the ground,” depending on whom you ask, Coober Pedy has a moonlike landscape that is desolate, otherworldly, awful and strangely beautiful all at once. No trees, no grass. Just dirt and white piles of mullock, leftovers from opal mining. Mining equipment scatters the town, so derelict looking that it’s hard to tell whether it’s in use or not. The place is so surreal looking that the town has served as the perfect backdrop for many a movie, including *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*.

Trying our own hand at opal hunting, we search through some of the mullock in the center of town. Seemingly from nowhere, a man appears and begins talking to us about living in this strange place where most residents live underground to escape the extreme heat, work underground to find opals and even go to church underground.

After just a few minutes of conversation, he

Outback traveler Klaus has been living on the road for five years with two camels, his dog and a cart. Here he’s seen with Snowy.



## As the sun rises, the magnificent red rock changes colors, from a deep, glowing dark red to purples and lighter pinks.

invites us to see his underground home. Strangely, we agree, curiosity having gotten the best of us. He walks ahead with his dog, while we follow in our car, nervously wondering if we are about to be the victims of some sort of violent crime. We're greeted at the door by his wife, and these two local schoolteachers soon put us at ease while showing us their house dug into the side of a hill.

What's it like to live underground?

"It's comfortable," says Kathy. "Underground, the rooms stay around 25 degrees, no matter how hot it gets outside. But I do miss the breeze through the windows."

Do you consider living in Coober Pedy – population 3,500 – to be living in the outback?

"Yes," says Kathy. "There is no daily newspaper here."

"No," says Mark. "The highway here is paved now, so it's not the outback."

**BACK IN THE CAR**, we travel into the Northern Territory, called outback Australia according to the license plates. Our destination is Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock, one of Australia's most recognized symbols next to Sydney's Opera House. A World Heritage site, the giant, red rock that is Uluru is 348 meters high and 9.4 kilometers in circumference, a huge monolith that stands high above the flat desert that surrounds it. Made from sandstone, it has lured thousands of tourists to climb its steep, bald face. About 32 kilometers west of Uluru is Kata Tjuta or the Olgas, a group of 36 steep-sided dome rock formations.

We get up early the next morning to catch the sunrise at Uluru. As we drive from our hotel, there is a long line of cars and tour buses ahead of us. We are in tourist central in the middle of the desert and are not sure how or when it happened. Parking our car, we walk past the crowds to enjoy our own view.

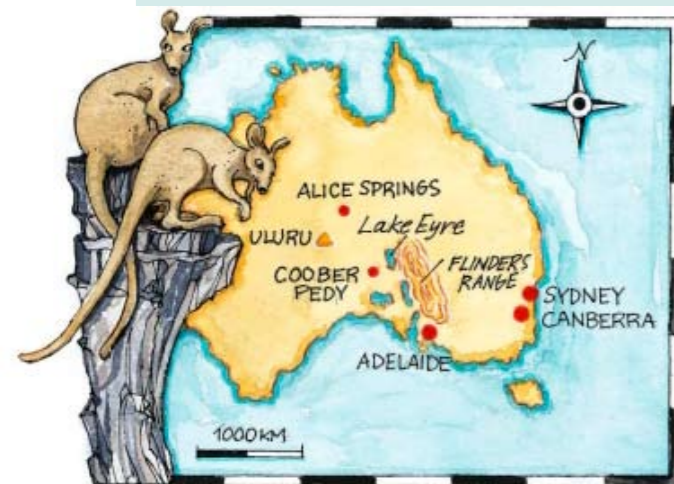
As the sun rises, the magnificent rock changes colors, from a deep, glowing dark red to purples and lighter pinks. (The rock itself isn't really changing colors, I know. It's just the effect of the earth's atmosphere on the sun's rays.) As soon as the sun is up, the crowd leaves and we are left virtually on our own to explore around the base of the rock.

Uluru has spiritual significance for the local aboriginals, and the park encourages you not to climb the 800-meter hike up the side out of respect for these beliefs, and also to avoid injury on the steep climb. Nonetheless, you are not prevented from undertaking the climb and many people do at least attempt it. Robert climbed the rock as a 10-year-old and is eager to do it again to make his own spiritual reconnection to the land. I am curious, so we start the climb. I get about 50 meters up and look down. The steep, slippery smooth face of the rock intimidates me and I freeze. So Robert goes on his own, and I sheepishly sit on the "coward's rock" just 20 meters up the face.

**JUST OUTSIDE OF ERLDUNDA** on our way to Alice Springs the next morning, we meet Klaus and his two camels resting alongside the road next to a small cart. Although his thick German accent



### "ONLY IN THE OUTBACK" FACTS



**RESIDENTS OF NOTE** Outback Australia has the largest population of feral camels in the world. Other residents include dingoes, kangaroos, emus and probably billions of flies, by my own conservative estimate.

**RECREATION** In Coober Pedy, locals play golf at night with glowing balls to escape the heat of the day. There are no greens in this grassless place. For the green itself, the dirt is sprayed with diesel oil to make it stand out. Golfers carry a plastic piece of "turf" around with them to tee off.

**EDUCATION** Just because there's no town for hundred of kilometers, there's no excuse for skipping school. Children in remote and isolated areas attend the School of the Air – a virtual classroom taught via satellite internet these days, by radio earlier.

**HEALTH CARE** To provide much-needed medical care to the outback, the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia was started in 1928. The service flies doctors directly to remote areas.

**GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS** The dingo or dog fence is the world's longest at 5,320 kilometers. It was built in the 1880s to keep dingoes out of the more fertile southeast of Australia and protect the sheep flocks of Queensland.

**BIGGER IS BETTER** The outback is home to some of the world's largest cattle stations, including Anna Creek Station in South Australia. Covering 34,000 square kilometers, it's bigger than some European countries and can run up to 18,000 head of cattle when there's not a drought.

ILLUSTRATION: LOU-LOU PETERSSON

defines his heritage, Klaus has lived in Australia for 40 years. And for the last five, he's lived on the road with his camels seven-year-old Snowy (450 kilos) and nine-year-old Willy (500 kilos), his dog Nighter, and his cart.

Klaus carries just a few camping necessities on a small two-wheeled cart, and he is in need of a shower and clean clothes. But he is eager for conversation and is up-to-date with the news in spite of his vagabond lifestyle.

"I don't mind politicians telling lies, but it's another thing if they want me to believe the lies," he says.

Why do you live on the road?

"I don't like to answer to anyone."

As we drive off, I look back to see Klaus share the banana that we gave him with Willy the camel.

Before flying out of Alice Springs the next day, we drive to Simpsons Gap. We arrive early and no one is in the canyon except for about a dozen

rock wallabies. We see one high up on the cliff face above us, and then suddenly we start seeing them all around us. One calmly drinks from a water hole about five meters away, ignoring us and our camera lens so that he can quench his thirst. We watch the wallabies for about 45 minutes when we hear voices in the distance and see a small group of tourists making their way into the gap. With that, we decide it's our time to go.

Populated with spectacular scenery, quirky characters, cows, kangaroos, and a rugged and often empty terrain, the outback is a destination that repeatedly calls me back for more exploration. Next time I have to go the four-wheel drive route again, though. It just feels more right. □

**SANDRA CARPENTER**, *Scanorama's* editor in chief, is just back from another trip to the land Down Under and is already trying to plan when her next trip will be. [sandra.carpenter@sasmedia.se](mailto:sandra.carpenter@sasmedia.se)

With kilometers of nothing but flat desert landscape all around it, the large monolith of Uluru is an irresistible destination for many.