

Get some Fresh Eyre

With the roads reopened following the big wet, 4WDers are keen to get back on the iconic track from Cameron Corner to Lake Eyre

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Lake Eyre lies in a remote and desolate area. It is the third-largest salt lake in the world, and the catchment area covers one sixth of the Australian continent. Heavy rains have transformed the lake from a salt plain to an outback oasis. With the rains came a number of road closures resulting in 4WDers having to sit tight and be patient for a glimpse of Lake Eyre in this rare form. With the tracks now reopened, 4WDers around the country are bursting out of the blocks to follow the iconic path from Cameron Corner to Lake Eyre to get out and see this natural wonder at its best.

4WDers coming from the Queensland coast will be tempted by more than one attraction en route to Cameron Corner. West of Cunnamulla is Eulo, an old outback opal mining town. It was once a thriving place nestled on the Paroo River, but is now more widely known for its Yapunya Honey and the Palm Grove date and fig farm. Ian and Nan Pike run the farm from late February to October, and it's a great stop to sample their delicious produce and to see some interesting memorabilia.

The real starting point of the outback



YOU GET A SENSE OF HOW REMOTE THE OUTBACK REALLY IS

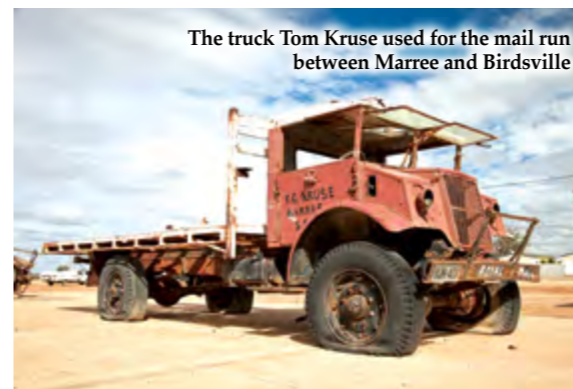
and the beginning of the dirt is Noccundra in the far west of Queensland, just off the Adventure Highway. The Noccundra Hotel was established in 1882 and exudes character and head-hurting low doorways! It is fully licensed and provides great food that we gladly sampled. There is easy access to free-camping by the Wilson River just across the road and a gold coin donation to the Royal Flying Doctor is all you need to use the hot showers. It's so relaxing to just cast a line in the water and watch the herons, egrets and kites trying to outdo you.

The previous summer rains had brought out the mice in numbers. Unfortunately, it appears that the mice are particularly good climbers with the ability to scale slippery tent walls. It's a strange and unnerving sound having rodents run across your tent roof. It's one of those unique outback experiences.

Noccundra itself is worthy of a couple of days of your time before heading to Cameron Corner on the New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland borders. There is a small campsite, repair garage, fuel station and 'The Corner Store' with basic provisions. It's at this point you start to get a sense of how



Cameron Corner - The Post



The truck Tom Kruse used for the mail run between Marree and Birdsville

remote the outback really is.

An unmistakable icon of the area is 'The Yellow Bus' on the way to Merty Merty in the Strzelecki Desert. Story has it the bus broke down a number of years ago and was abandoned because it couldn't be repaired. It's a remarkable area and everything you could hope to



Emerging from the scrub in the Gammon Ranges

find when looking for total peace and quiet. With a warm fire going as the sun sets on the outback horizon, it's hard to imagine a more peaceful place as the stars show themselves. With nothing but a tree, a bus, a delightful little dusky hopping mouse and the company you brought with you, you won't need anything else.

It's hard to leave the bus, but the next part of the drive is incredible, crossing the Strzelecki Desert and heading for the Gammon National Park in the Flinders Ranges. There seemed to be endless sand

STAYING THERE

Currawinya National Park was \$10.50 per night and toilets are situated by the ruins near the entry to the camping area. Noccundra has free camping by the river. Toilets and showers are available just a short walk away at the Noccundra Hotel. There is free bush camping available by the Yellow Bus.

Arkaroola and Leigh Creek both have large well-equipped campsites at under \$20 per night. Farina has a large camping area with flush toilets and a hot shower for \$5 per night per person. Muloorina, on the track to Lake Eyre, is \$6 per night and has toilets.

Outback touring isn't for those precious about paintwork



DRIVING TIPS

Like any epic trip, you will have to ensure your vehicle is adequately prepared. With large distances between fuel stops, it pays to drive in a conservative manner to ensure fuel consumption is kept to a minimum in case of any detours along the route due to road closures.

It doesn't get much more peaceful than camping by the Noccundra Waterhole

Outback tourers need to conduct daily checks on their 4WD



FUEL AND SUPPLIES

Thargomindah and Leigh Creek have well-stocked food stores. Most of the outback towns have limited provisions. Across the desert you have to be as self-sufficient as possible. Carry plenty of water, fuel, two spare tyres and essential spares and tools as well as a good first aid kit. A form of emergency communication is recommended.

The furthest distance between fuel stops was 450km for diesel and 570km for unleaded. Not all stations in the outback have unleaded fuel. Basic repairs were catered for at most towns. Diesel varied between \$1.60/L and \$2.20/L



Our fishing skills were no match for the egrets which live by Wilson River

ROAD CONDITIONS

Most of the off-road portion of this trip was of a moderate difficulty. The tracks south from Mt Hopeless, some in the Flinders Ranges and from Muloorina to Lake Eyre were rough with potholes, river crossings and some big corrugations. It wouldn't take much rain for conditions to deteriorate rapidly so be well prepared.

Conditions can be checked by visiting: www.racq.com.au/travel/Maps_and_Directions/road_conditions

dunes to cross. It's a great idea to get the kids to try and count them. 'The Desert' conjures up all sorts of fears and visions of getting stuck in the sand, or breaking down with no one else around for hundreds of kilometres. Sadly, and we say that with tongue in cheek, the road had recently been graded and was quite easy driving. Being in the desert is an awesome experience and not quickly forgotten.

The next memorable stop along the way is the Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary that nestles in the rugged hills of the Northern Flinders Ranges,

30km into the Gammon Ranges. It hosts motel-style accommodation, cabins and two camping areas that run alongside the Wywhyana Creek. Camping is \$18 per night with hot showers and clean toilets provided. If you've had enough of camp cooking, you can try out their great dinner menu in the comfortable restaurant.

There are numerous activities such as mountain biking and bird watching or you can self-drive a number of 4WD-only graded gravel tracks. It is also an astronomer's heaven with three astronomical observatories that house professional telescopes. There are several bushwalks that are well signed with good tracks and we enjoyed a fairly easy 9km walk to the Pinnacle. It was full of bird life and colourful flora.

Winding your way across 60km of 4WD-only tracks out to the Paralana Hot Springs, the desert colours and scenery are spectacular. Photographers won't be able to resist taking more than a few happy snaps. If you do visit this area, keep an eye out for the endangered and shy yellow-footed rock wallaby.

Those 4WDers seeking a bit of solitude should drive into the national park and find the bush campsite at Grindells Hut. The 4WD track is quite rough going in places with shallow creek crossings and deep ruts, but it's great fun. It costs \$6 per night to camp and toilets are provided. It can get cold at night, but it's nothing that a roaring campfire and cook up can't combat. For those feeling energetic there is a cracking 8km bushwalk to the Weetootla Gorge where you can rock hop up the river.

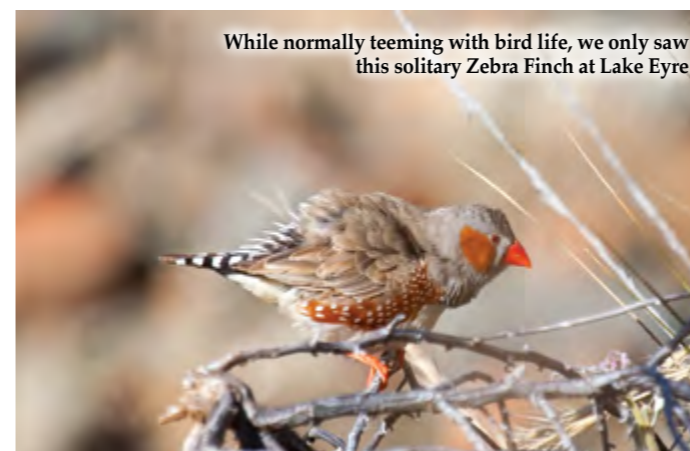
Back on the track, Leigh Creek offers a great place to stock up on any supplies that are running low and spoil yourself with a coffee. It's all dirt and gravel roads from Noccundra to Copley near Leigh Creek, so you won't see the boring bitumen for over 750km.

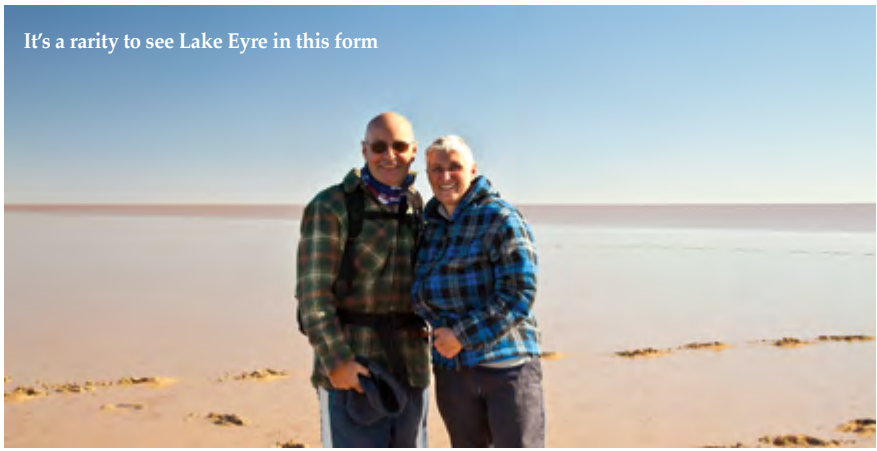
The next highlight is Farina, which is 26km north of Lyndhurst. It used to be a small farming town settled in 1878, but all that is left now are the ruins and reminders of what used to be. Camping was \$5 per person per night and toilets and showers are provided. An old 'donkey' system heats the shower water, and as long as you remember to



The winding road to Paralana hot springs

While normally teeming with bird life, we only saw this solitary Zebra Finch at Lake Eyre





It's a rarity to see Lake Eyre in this form

GETTING THERE

This trek commences at the Gold Coast and heads to Noccundra. From Noccundra head to Cameron Corner and on to the Strzelecki Desert before going through Copley, near Leigh Creek en route to Lake Eyre.

Suitable maps on the areas include:
HEMA - Great Desert Tracks - SE Sheet
Camps 5 Book

GPS COORDINATES
Cameron Corner
28°59'56.73"S, 140°59'55.97"E

put a log on the fire, it will remain lovely and hot. Foraging for timber proved hard work, but the local farmer sells old sleepers that used to form part of the Old Ghan Railway and they kept us going for several nights!

Reaching Marree, you'll realise that Lake Eyre is so close. Marree is steeped in history and you can see the abandoned railway locomotives that used to form part of the Old Ghan Railway as well as Tom Kruse's mail truck; he was a true outback legend who delivered the post by truck across the desert to Birdsville for many years. An amazing man who did some amazing things. Sadly at the time of our visit he had died the week before, aged 96. There were posters everywhere

commemorating his life.

Edging closer to Lake Eyre, there is only one campsite at Muloonia by the Frome River, 45km from the lake itself. It is a birder's delight with red-backed kingfishers and hundreds of water birds.

The road to the lake is recommended for 4WD vehicles only as it is rough with potholes and corrugations. The landscape changes so often at the lake. While hundreds of birds can be seen at certain times of the year, sadly at the time of our visit there was only one bird sitting on the wing mirror of a truck in the carpark, a beautiful little zebra finch. Evidently, the water was too salty for the fish so there were no birds.

It's such a barren place yet so spectacular. Walking the 1.8km from the shore to the point your feet break through the thin salt crust and into the mud below to wet your feet is proof you have made it. For many 4WDers this trip is a once in a lifetime experience. Given the changes this environment experiences, every 4WDer should return, as no two trips will be the same. ■

IT'S ONE OF THOSE UNIQUE OUTBACK EXPERIENCES



The Farina Ruins shine at night