



riding the Rails

WESTWARD BOUND FROM ADELAIDE TO
PERTH, ACROSS AUSTRALIA'S ARID OUTBACK.

STORY + IMAGES BRIAR JENSEN
ADDITIONAL IMAGES THINKSTOCK
+ GREAT SOUTHERN RAIL

NULLARBOR. THE EVOCATIVE word rolls off the tongue like an intriguing invitation to explore Australia's vast plain.

Nullarbor means 'no trees' but, contrary to popular belief, it is not an Aboriginal word. It derives from Latin. Sometimes dubbed Nullar-bore, it's the arid nature of the almost treeless landscape that allures, encompassing the world's largest single exposure of limestone bedrock.

This parched desert boasts the longest section of straight rail track in the world – 478km between Ooldea and Rawlinna – so it seems appropriate to explore it aboard the *Indian Pacific*. Travelling between Sydney and Perth, the *Indian Pacific* covers 4352km in four days and three nights, but you can join the train in Adelaide for the 2669km two-night journey to Perth.

Travelling Gold Service, I have the luxury of a twin-berth sleeper with ensuite bathroom. A comfortable three-seater lounge takes in the view through the expansive window by day, and converts to bunks in the evening.

Meals are served in the charming Queen Adelaide Restaurant, a traditional dining car reminiscent of yesteryear, with pressed metal ceiling and etched glass partitions. Meals feature fresh regional produce and the service is courteous and friendly under the guidance of moustachioed hospitality manager Jos Engelaar, who has worked aboard for 17 years.

The Outback Explorer Lounge is the hub of the train, with its cosy armchairs and curved sofas. Guests gather to socialise over a coffee or aperitif, or just

The *Indian Pacific* stops at the siding of Cook.

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relax and watch the scenery as the train rolls along at an average 85km/h.

I'm mesmerised by the emptiness of the Nullarbor, stretching to the horizon on either side. Changes are subtle – red sand hills to orange stone country, mallee scrub to saltbush stubble. Distant camels are silhouetted against the sky. Somewhere out there to the north is the Maralinga nuclear testing site of the 1950s.

Cook, once a thriving railway siding of 200 people until privatisation in 1979, is now a derelict village of four. The weed-sprouting swimming pool and dangling basketball hoop hint of better times, but poignant murals and quirky signs depict life beside the rail line with a generous slug of outback humour.

The next shady trees are 500km further on at the tiny outpost of Rawlinna. Bordering one of Australia's largest sheep properties, the million-hectare Rawlinna Station, the stop is an occasional disembarkation point for jackaroos. (New this season, guests can dine under the stars beside the station.)

Kalgoorlie-Boulder is home to the largest single open cut mine in the world, the Super Pit, so I take the evening Gold Rush tour to Hannans North Tourist Mine. I gain some perspective on the mine by the size of the machinery, hopping in the wheel of an enormous dump truck for a photo.

The Nullarbor Plain's desolate landscape.

Awaking on the last morning, the outback is but a memory, barren earth replaced by bustling suburbia on the outskirts of Perth. But I'm thrilled to have at last crossed the vast expanse of the Nullarbor.

WHAT TO SEE IN ADELAIDE

Stroll along North Terrace for grand colonial sandstone architecture. Continue on to the Botanic Gardens and take a walk through the avenue of fig trees planted in 1866. Learn about winemaking on a self-guided tour of the National Wine Centre, or if time permits, take a day trip to one of South Australia's famous wine regions. Visit Adelaide Central Market for fresh local produce and delicious coffee. Take a free tour of Haigh's Chocolate factory and catch a tram to the beachside suburb of Glenelg. For arts and crafts, head to the Jam Factory, a purpose-built, non-profit studio complex supporting design and craftsmanship, where you can watch artists at work, before purchasing some unusual handcrafted items in the gift shop. southaustralia.com

WHAT TO SEE IN PERTH

Admire the contrasting architecture on a city walk taking in the Town Hall, Government House and the Perth Mint, where you can watch gold being poured on a tour. Then head to the Bell Tower, home of the Swan Bells (including the only royal bells known to have left England) before taking a cruise on the Swan River. Combine magnificent views and Aboriginal history on an Indigenous Heritage Tour of Kings Park Botanic Garden, home to an enormous 750-year-

The railway siding of Cook gives a glimpse of yesteryear.



A dish from the Queen Adelaide menu.

old boab tree. Northbridge offers specialty shopping and an array of restaurants, as does the beachside port city/suburb of Fremantle at the mouth of the Swan River. Take a wine tour of the Swan Valley or a bar tour of Perth's funky laneways. experienceperth.com

ALL ABOARD

From this season the *Indian Pacific's* stops differ in each direction. From Adelaide to Perth it stops at Rawlinna for a track-side dinner under the stars. From Perth to Adelaide it stops at Kalgoorlie for a mine visit and Cook for a self-guided walk. Off-train excursions are included in the price of Gold and Platinum Service tickets. greatsouthernrail.com.au

Note: The writer was a guest of Great Southern Rail. ■

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