

# ROAD TRIP

AMAZING JOURNEYS, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

## CORNERED IN THE OUTBACK

Tracing Charles Sturt's footsteps around Corner Country will uncover outback history, perennial hospitality and desolate landscapes spanning three states

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**"IT'S NOT THE MIDDLE** of nowhere. It's the centre of everywhere," says a sign stencilled on the end of a tank at Cameron Corner Store. It's on the Queensland side of the tri-state border fences shared with NSW and South Australia.

The 38,000 square-kilometre area in north-western NSW is known as Corner Country and has a population of about 300. While it does feel like the middle of nowhere to those of us from the eastern seaboard, that's part of its appeal. Out here the sky fills the windscreen and roads disappear into the

distance of vast gibber plains. At night you can sense the earth rotate as the Milky Way traverses the sky. The grandeur of scale is captivating.

"I love the nothingness, just love it," says Bec Young, who bought the Albert Hotel in Milparinka about 22 years ago. It's a refrain that echoes around Corner Country.

It has been 11 years since I last visited and the transformation is incredible, especially considering (or perhaps because) it's an unincorporated region, meaning it's not part of any local

government area. Instead, it's administered by a volunteer village committee. There are only two unincorporated areas in NSW, the other being Lord Howe Island.

Tourism is crucial to supplement the largely rural economy and in 2020 the Milparinka Heritage & Tourism Association received a \$5.8 million infrastructure grant, thanks to the vision and determination of its founder and chairperson of 25 years, grazier Ruth Sandow. She received the Dean Goddard Award for her outstanding individual contribution to tourism in 2021.

The result is Sturt's Steps, a fully signposted 1100km circular driving route from Broken Hill through Packsaddle, Milparinka, Tibooburra and Sturt National Park to Cameron Corner, incorporating waypoint interpretation, an art trail, new museums, an astronomy park, station stays and the Wild Deserts project.

The route roughly follows that of explorer Charles Sturt on his Central Australian Expedition in 1845 when his party searched futilely for an inland sea, and provides a conduit for stories of geology, astronomy, Aboriginal history, European





From left to right: exploring Mount Gipps Station; the Family Hotel's famed murals in Tibooburra; a modern road train contrasts with a sculpture of yesteryear's equivalent at Tibooburra; the dining room at Packsaddle Roadhouse lives up to the name.



exploration and outback living. "I like people to know stuff," says Ruth, "to get an emotional connection and go away with a much deeper understanding."

I join a small group of outback visitor centre staff on a reconnaissance trip with Silver City Tours, heading out of Broken Hill along the Silver City Highway. Previously a patchworked scarf of grey gravel, white stone and red dirt stitched together with scraps of black tar, it's now sealed all the way to Tibooburra. It would be unrecognisable to Sturt, who struggled to find a route through dense mulga thickets for his unwieldy party of 16 men, 11 horses, 30 bullocks, 200 sheep, six dogs, whale boat and a couple of cumbersome drays. Imagine getting that lot stuck in the mud - though they were mostly beleaguered by lack of water.

These are the traditional lands of the Malyangapa and Wadigali, desert people who knew how to survive the harsh conditions. Though Sturt maintained cordial relations with them, he failed to heed their warnings about the treacherous conditions and scarcity of reliable water. His party stumbled between shrivelling waterholes and creek beds in heat so fierce one of their thermometers burst after registering the equivalent of 52°C in the shade. Sturt wrote, "The blasts of heat were so terrific that I wondered the very grass did not take fire." I'm thankful for our air-conditioned, fly-proof 4WD bus.

With Broken Hill in the rear-view mirror, the terrain pans out into successive waves of calico-coloured quartz, windswept amber sandhills and russet gibber plains whose stones are polished to a cinnabar gleam known as desert varnish.

Our driver-guide is retired teacher and local artist Clark Barrett. Having traversed the region on painting excursions for the past 40 years, he knows the area intimately, and points out petrified wood at our feet and 'jump-ups' in the distance - flat-topped ranges decapitated by erosion.

## The mulga forests that hampered Sturt are long gone to firewood, fence posts and farming

The mulga forests that hampered Sturt are long gone to firewood, fence posts and farming, leaving a prickly stubble of bluebush, saltbush and spinifex. Recent rain has also sprouted myriad grasses whose sunlit seedheads shimmy in the breeze like fringing on a flapper dress. They attract mobs of feral goats in dappled coats, bustle-bottomed emu dads trailing stripy chicks, and diamond-shaped flash mobs of luminous lime budgerigars performing aerial ballets. Ancient river red gums hug the watercourses that snake across the plains. Their sandy tracks make shady picnic spots with surround-sound birdsong that beats any meditation app.

Pulling up at Packsaddle Roadhouse, halfway to Tibooburra, it's obvious Mia and Arnie Degoumois have spruced up the place. There's a children's playground and front annex with a stylish plant-walled corner rivalling any city rooftop terrace, together with a timber bar perfect for saluting sunsets with a coldie. The dining room is a nostalgic tribute to outback life, resplendent with dusty cowboy boots, leather saddlebags and well-loved Akubras, while the steaks are as big as I remember.

Back on the highway next morning, willy-willies twirl red dust like fairy floss and race across the plain in front of Koonenberry Mountain. A dirt track detour leads us to a vast salt lake that appears to dissolve into water in the distance but is no doubt where the chalk-white crust still crunches underfoot like frost.

Near a section of highway, which doubles as an emergency landing strip for the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS), are the



Main Image: Alamy Stock Photo

Tool Trees. Apparently erected by a boiler maker in a send-up on outback art, I notice he's upped the ante since my last visit, with the taller tree looking, dare I say, more artistic.

The first town declared on the Albert Goldfields in the 1880s, Milparinka later shrank to a ghost town that travellers bypassed, but it's now undergoing a makeover of epic proportions. New caravan/camping sites, shelters and fire pits are interspersed with native gardens near Evelyn Creek waterhole, and it'll soon have a night-sky viewing area and children's adventure zone.

The handful of original sandstone buildings now house stories of the Malyangapa, as well as pioneering women and the ANZACs, while the new Albert Goldfields Mining Heritage Centre succinctly articulates the hardships of goldfields life. Acclaimed artist Jodi Daley has painted a mural that wraps around the farm sheds and depicts the area's historical timeline. There's a new building dedicated to Sturt's expedition and pastoralist Sir Sidney Kidman, which is where we find a contemporary portrait of Charles Sturt by our guide, Clark.

While publican Bec and her family are the only permanent residents, a roster of volunteers operates the visitor centre from April to October and Milparinka is now worthy of a couple of days if you can spare them. But after lunch at the pub we move on to nearby Depot Glen, where Sturt's party was trapped for six months and his second-in-command, James Poole, succumbed to scurvy and was buried. The only one of Sturt's party to perish, his initials and the year 1845 were carved into the trunk of a grevillea tree. To guard against boredom while marooned here, his men built Sturt's Cairn atop Mount Poole and a visit shows the dry and inhospitable terrain Sturt described as "one of the most gloomy regions that man ever traversed."

We continue to Tibooburra township, corralled by tors of 400-million-year-old granite boulders resembling gigantic



## Cameron Corner Store is a pinprick in the desert that draws adventurers from all directions

marbles (Tibooburra means 'heaps of rocks'). With two pubs, two stores and two petrol outlets, it's known as the 'capital' of Corner Country.

A wire sculpture of a camel and cameleer outside the town's new museum silently watches modern supply trucks roll past, while a life-size replica of Sturt's boat towers upside down above Pioneer Park at the other end of town. Kids will love the Tardis-like NPWS Visitor Centre with its taxidermy animals and jars of pickled frogs, spiders and snakes.

With the Tibooburra Hotel undergoing renovations following a fire in 2021, we dine at the Family Hotel. It's famous for three-time Archibald Prize winner Clifton Pugh's 'racy' murals painted on its walls in the 1960s, featuring nudes supposedly modelled on the then publican's daughters. Other artists including Russell Drysdale, Rick Amor and Eric Minchin later added to the works.

My favourite mural is Roxanne Minchin's Dog Fence piece framing a doorway. She was painting it when I was here in 2011 and told me that when her late husband Eric exhibited his outback art in the US, viewers questioned why he painted the dirt so red. He took samples to later exhibitions to allay their scepticism.

Next day, we head to Cameron Corner, crossing a parched claypan of dirt cracked into jigsaw pieces. At Fort Grey, another of Sturt's base camps beside ephemeral Lake Pinaroo, we pick tiny, yellow saltbush berries that have a citrusy burst in the mouth like finger-lime pearls. If only Sturts' men had tried them, they may have thwarted scurvy.

A mega-fauna-sized quoll at the campground here is one of three sculptures highlighting the Wild Deserts project to reintroduce locally extinct mammals into Sturt National Park. The other sculptures are a bandicoot at Wild Deserts lookout and a bilby at Cameron Corner. All are made with wire offcuts from the enclosures where the mammals are being released. Given all three are tiny and nocturnal, you won't see them from the lookout, but you can read about them and, in future, watch recorded footage of their activity. Ecologists Dr Rebecca West and her husband Dr Reece Pedler oversee the project and are also subjects of an ABC *Australian Story* episode 'Into the Wild'.

Dunes Scenic Drive delivers us to the Dog Fence as depicted in Roxanne's painting. The wire fence pierces the middle of a sandy terracotta track and undulates endlessly beneath a cerulean sky. It's mesmerising and we're drawn to walk beside the fence, our boots sinking into the wind-rippled sand. Originally built to keep rabbits from farmland and then dingoes from livestock, it's one of the longest manmade structures in the world.

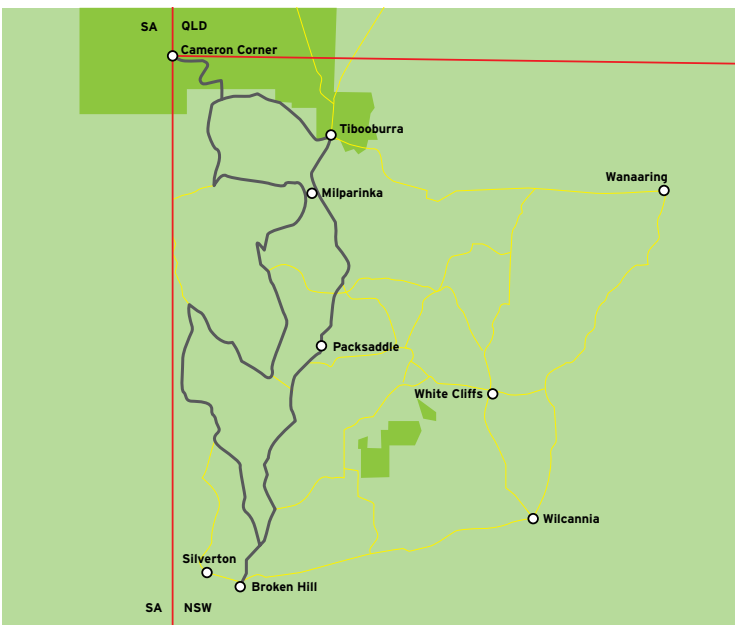
With no gate from NSW to Queensland here, we clamber through the fence into South Australia to the post marking the intersection of the three states, then back through the fence to Cameron Corner Store in Queensland. It's a quirk that created havoc when the states had differing pandemic lockdowns.



Visitors' caps adorn the walls of Cameron Corner Store.



The deserted miner's shack at Mount Gipps Station.



Cameron Corner Store, also a pub and petrol outlet, is a pinprick in the desert that draws adventurers from all directions. They attach caps and RFDS donation tags to the walls and ceiling to celebrate their arrival. Behind the bar are Ash Jordan and Bert Caddey - 19-year-olds working for a few weeks after operating ski lifts at Mount Buller. It's their first time in the outback and their enthusiasm is palpable. "There's nothing like the desert," says Ash, whose friends are incredulous of her isolation.

Road closures thwart our loop route back to Broken Hill the next day, so we detour from the highway to The Veldt and Mount Gipps Station. The Veldt homestead features on Australia's \$20 note beneath the RFDS de Havilland Dragon. Now a dilapidated ruin, wind whistles through its outbuildings with the whiff of decay, clanging loose corrugated iron and dumping red dust in a porcelain toilet bowl.

There are more ruins at Mount Gipps Station, including a shanty miner's shack with peeling wallpaper and boots abandoned by the bed. Owner Sam Maiden says it will feature in the upcoming movie *Carmen* (2022). The property attracts artists, photographers, geologists, walkers and 4WD enthusiasts and offers both camping and cottages. It might be just 40km from Broken Hill, but at 100,000 acres, it too feels like the middle of nowhere. 📍

### OUTBACK TRAVEL TIPS

- There's more to see than you might think, so allow plenty of time for your trip.
- Take a fly net for your hat and good walking shoes for stony ground.
- Check for notifications about road conditions after rain.
- Be prepared to open and shut gates once you're off the Silver City Highway.
- Leave your caravan in Tibooburra if you don't want to tow it on corrugated roads. It can be fun to day-trip or overnight at farm stays instead.
- Combine Sturt's Steps with the Darling River Run for a longer journey.
- Prefer to be driven? Book a trip with Silver City Tours at [silvercitytours.com.au/corner-country](http://silvercitytours.com.au/corner-country).
- For more information on the region, head to [visitcornercountry.com.au](http://visitcornercountry.com.au).

ADVERTORIAL

## New TV Soundbar Speaker Beats Expensive Hearing Aids

**Frustrated television listeners are now putting their hearing aids to the side for TV viewing, with the release of Australia's first TV hearing-aid soundbar by TV Voice Pro. The soundbar automatically clarifies hard-to-hear TV speech and dialogue, with no need for the use of a traditional hearing aid, or even the need for a hearing test.**

Hearing specialist Don Hudson says up to 70% of hearing aid wearers, including those with sets of hearing aids worth thousands of dollars, still report significant difficulty hearing TV dialogue, and are regularly missing out on much of their favourite TV programs, or attempting to solve the problem by increasing the TV volume to loud levels, to the detriment of others in the home.

Unlike traditional hearing aids, the *TV Voice Pro Soundbar* accesses the TV audio directly, and utilises a speech enhancement formula based on the analysis of thousands of audiograms (hearing tests results) of those with hearing loss, and automatically reconfigures the TV audio to a speech enhanced sound quality, suitable for those with mild to severe hearing loss. Don Hudson says,

"Regular TV speakers and soundbars often boost surround sound and background effects and consequently drown out the dialogue. The TV Voice Pro Soundbar makes dialogue the priority for all TV audio, and this is how we have solved the problem."

Users of the *TV Voice Pro Soundbar* can select from three speech clarifying sound settings via the soundbar remote control, and have further access to clarify TV dialogue to suit their hearing needs if they wish, by simply increasing or decreasing the treble or bass. The soundbar will automatically remember the user's preference for TV sound clarity.

The *TV Voice Pro Soundbar* has been designed as a sleek 80cm-long audio speaker which can sit below your TV on any hard surface, or be mounted. What's truly exceptional is that customers can even order

the new *TV Voice Pro Soundbar* as a package with the already well-known TV Voice Pro wireless earphones. Hearing specialist Don Hudson says,

"A really unique benefit is that the new *TV Voice Pro Soundbar* can operate in unison with any of the TV Voice Pro wireless earphone options. This offers TV listeners the best of both worlds, allowing them to either listen to TV in private with lightweight earphones that clarify TV dialogue, or instead with the soundbar turned on when others are in the room. We have designed the products so that they can be used in unison on the same TV, or alternatively, many of our customers choose to use the *TV Voice Pro Soundbar* in their main living room for TV listening, and the TV Voice Pro wireless earphones on a separate TV in the household, such as in the bedroom. This guarantees they will hear TV speech and dialogue clearly no matter which TV they are using."

The *TV Voice Pro Soundbar* and the TV Voice Pro wireless earphones are simple to use and can be connected to any TV in under 2 minutes.

**The soundbar can be purchased on its own for \$549, or as a package with a set of TV Voice Pro wireless earphones for \$879. All TV Voice Pro products are guaranteed to connect to any TV, new or old.**

**TV Voice Pro products come with a 30-day money back guarantee and free express delivery anywhere in Australia. To order call 1300 300 446 or order online at [www.TvVoicePro.com.au](http://www.TvVoicePro.com.au)**

