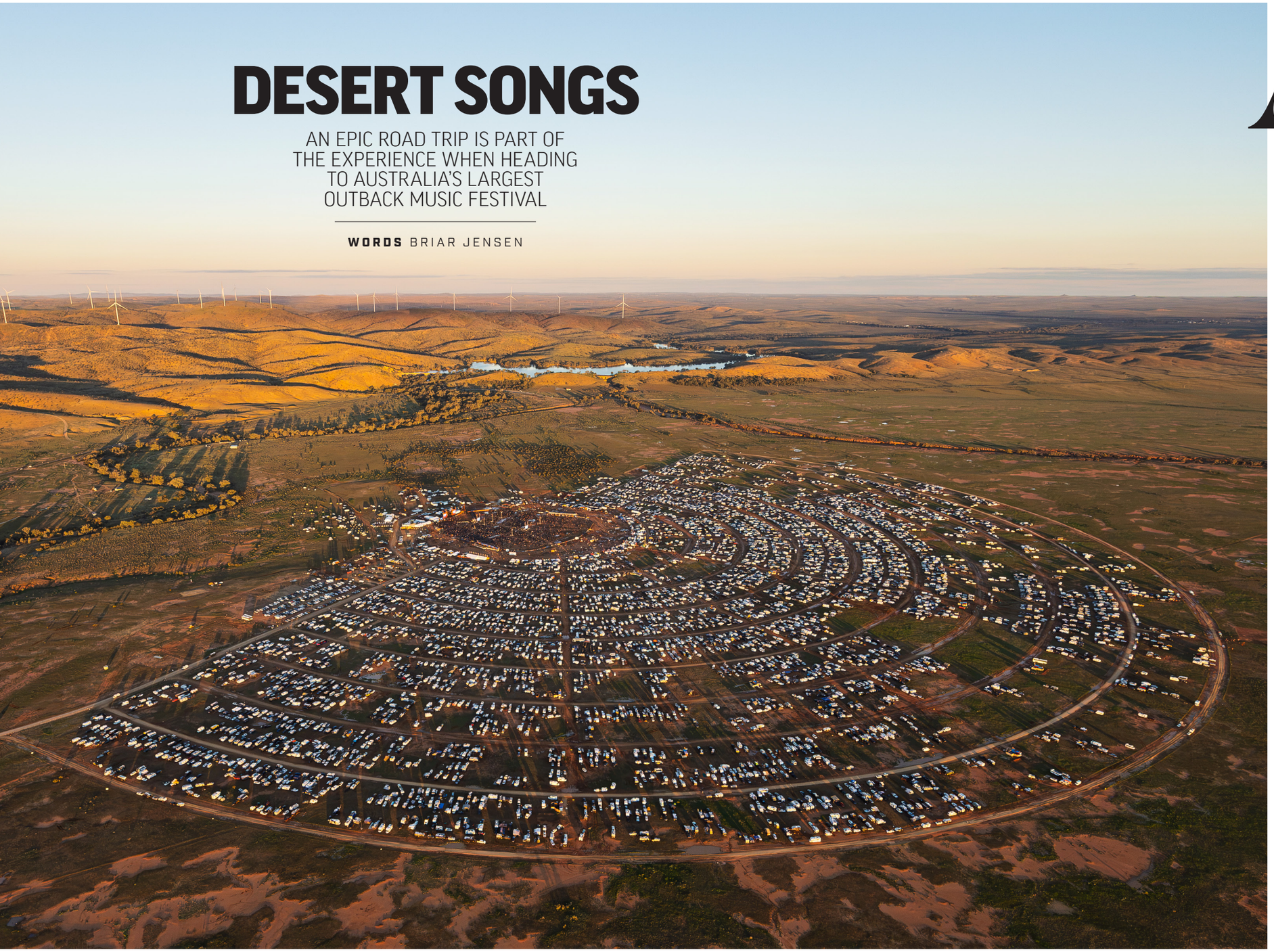
DESERT SONGS

AN EPIC ROAD TRIP IS PART OF THE EXPERIENCE WHEN HEADING TO AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST OUTBACK MUSIC FESTIVAL

WORDS BRIAR JENSEN



A **LIQUORICE** strip of bitumen carves through semi-arid plains flush with grey-green saltbush. Feral goats meander beside the road, and oncoming drivers bestow steering wheel salutes. We're bound for the Mundi Mundi Bash, and getting to the far-flung festival is half the fun.

Like an epic expedition, preparations started months ago – gathering a convoy of family and friends, planning the route, servicing vehicles and vans, creating copious lists – all of which ups the excitement and anticipation.

The Mundi Mundi Bash is a three-day, all ages, outback music festival in the desert of far-western NSW. A culture of community and respect underpins the gathering, which Greg Donovan founded as a sister festival to Birdsville's Big Red Bash. Its remote location on the Mundi Mundi Plains, 40km beyond Broken Hill, featured in the movie *Mad Max 2* (1981), but you don't need a 4WD to get there.

The festival attracts 15,000 people and includes families, retirees and solo travellers, who instil a sense of camaraderie even before we leave home. The Facebook group, Travelling to the Mundi Mundi Bash, with some 40,000 members, shares packing tips and route recommendations. It also has a Bound for the Bash banner competition, vehicle stickers, and merchandise, so patrons recognise each other on the road.

Our convoy of three caravans departs Sydney for the 1200km trip, travelling north on the M1, then inland on the Golden Highway, through verdant vineyards and horse studs to our first stop at Sandy Hollow. Part of the Bash ethos is supporting businesses en route and we dine at the local pub.

Bugs splatter the windscreen as we drive west to Nyngan, past wheat silos and cotton bales, tufts from which litter the roadside like residual snow. It's my Ineos Grenadier's first long-distance tow, and hubby and I enjoy our time at the wheel.

Fuel anxiety looms on the 400km leg from Nyngan to Wilcannia, despite an emergency jerry can, so we pull into Emmdale Roadhouse 100km shy of Wilcannia. As the owner of 16 years, Virginia Beard, whips up plump toasted sandwiches, the barista explains how pre-Bash traffic spans several days, whereas post-Bash is "manic" as thousands of festival-goers rush home.

Bashers, as we're called, converge at Wilcannia. Around campfires at council-run Victory Caravan Park, on the banks of the Darling River, we meet a couple from Newcastle heading to help at their cousin's stall. MJ from Balmain is planning to meet with the Solo Ladies Travelling to Mundi Mundi group, and a chap from Yeppoon in Queensland is rejoining the army of festival volunteers. It seems we're already making Bash friends.

Wilcannia, like Walgett, suffers from a perception of unrest decades out of date, says farmer Jill McNamara, so







she's happy to see festival-goers stopping in town. We're on the verandah of Wilcannia Café 2836 and Jill sells hand-harvested salt from Lake Copago, which she blends with herbs and spices.

Inside the café the welcome is as cheerful as the staff's Indigenous print shirts. The owner says she employs seven locals and adds an extra staff member for pre- and post-festival. We enjoy breakfast, with gluten-free options, in the garden overlooking riverside Baker Park.

From Wilcannia it's 200km to Broken Hill. On approach, the enormous Line of Lode mullock mound dwarfs the outback city and birthplace of mining giant BHP. We stay at the festival's official overflow camping area on the racecourse. Its facilities are funded with revenue from Bash patrons, and local Lions and Rotary charities sell home-cooked meals around the communal firepit.

In town, between gallery, grocery and hardware shopping, we visit Tydvil Hotel for our favourite saltbush gin. Eric, co-director of Broken Hill Distillery, says the Bash brings new customers who wouldn't normally visit. Council estimates the 2025 festival generated $18 million for the city, with spokesman Darrin Manuel saying that's testament to the quality of the festival and Broken Hill's hospitality, where shops display 'Welcome Bashers' signs.

We catch the first night of the inaugural Mundi Mundi Lightfest, a pre-Bash street party with live music, food trucks and drone shows. Locals are thrilled to see Broken Hill's main street bustling with nighttime activity and bookshop owner, Amanda Murray, tells us she's never made so many hot chocolates.

Unexpectedly, we hear from Bash HQ. Due to forecast rain, three-day early entry ticket holders can arrive ahead of time. (Festival entry is spread over three days to ease congestion.) We set off with van batteries and water tanks full. The road past historic Silverton crests the Barrier Ranges and the terrain drops to the vast red dirt of the Mundi Mundi Plains stretching to the horizon, as if someone has ironed the landscape flat.

The road curves downhill and we glimpse a massive semi-circular mandala etched into the earth beneath towering wind turbines. Mundiville, as the festival site is affectionately known, is an ephemeral village accommodating 15,000 guests, 700 volunteers and 250 staff, with composting toilets, recycling collection, food waste composting and its own radio station. It's incredible to think it's built and dismantled each year in a location with no power, water, or phone reception.

We're funnelled into a conga line of cars on the 5km queuing road, chatting with adjacent vehicles, before smiling volunteers marshal us down named streets to our neighbourhood site. Fellow campers say g'day and we're all thankful to be setting up before the bad weather.

But there's a hiccup for others still on the queuing road when darkness arrives. This makes it unsafe for manoeuvring onsite and they must camp there overnight.

August is typically Broken Hill's driest month, but for two nights record rain falls on already saturated ground, turning it into a quagmire. Vendor stalls are awash, the mosh pit is a mud pit, Mundiville is renamed 'Muddiville', and gumboots sell out. We feel for those in tents and swags.

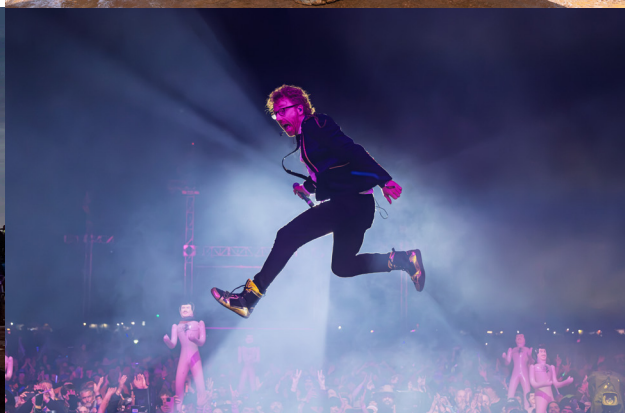
It's incredible to think it's built and dismantled each year in a place with no power, water, or phone reception

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT Argent Steet in Broken Hill lights up over three nights during the Mundi Mundi Lightfest; many festivalgoers choose to dress up in matching outfits; 19-Twenty's frontman Kane Dennelly; thousands of 'Tina Turners' join the Bash Choir to help raise money for charity.









CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Located on the real-life 'Wasteland', the Mad Max Procession revs up participants and onlookers; energy isn't lacking in the Furnace and the Fundamentals' performance; desert sunsets provide a magical backdrop to the entertainment.

Vendor stalls are awash, the mosh pit is a mud pit, and gumboots sell out



With about 30 per cent of the site too waterlogged for camping, organisers make the heart-wrenching decision to close the venue and refund the 5000 ticket holders not already onsite. But overcoming adversity is part and parcel of outback adventuring, with community spirit flourishing. Neighbours help neighbours, becoming friends, and patrons wade through ankle-deep puddles to support workshops, artisan stalls, and food trucks.

We settle into festival rhythm: philanthropic fun in the mornings, music from midday to 8.30pm, then relaxing around our campfire. On Big Blue Day, a sea of participants in blue outfits merge into the shape of Australia, raising $228,000 for Beyond Blue. We don Tina Turner wigs for the Bash Choir, belting out 'Simply The Best', and wear our undies on the outside for the hilarious Mundi Undi Run, making $150,000 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

In the concert area, we place camp chairs between puddles but eventually the sun comes out. The stellar lineup of artists – including Troy Cassar-Daley, The Teskey Brothers, Fanny Lumsden and 19-Twenty – are equally excited to be here, stopping mid-set to say, "How good is this?" or "Check out the sunset behind you". Everyone is chipper and cheerful, volunteers sway at their stations, and a policewoman dances with a patron, eliciting applause.

That's the magic of Mundi – the alchemy between artists, audience, landscape, and music. Jessica Mauboy's joyous energy brightens an overcast sky, sunset's orange ambiance is electrified by John Butler's steel lap guitar, and audience singalongs resound beneath a million stars.

Leo Sayer says he loves the festival's unpredictability. "In a theatre everything is planned, you're in control, but here you're slightly out of control and you have to react to the crowd. That's what makes festivals exciting."

As a gesture of goodwill, Bash artists perform free pop-up shows for ticketholders stuck in Silverton and Broken Hill, and social media posts show Bashers stranded further afield channelling festival spirit with their own Big Blue Day, Bash Choir and Undi Run.

Some performers, like Busby, travel here in their own caravans. "It feels really safe and fun," he says. "I'm loving watching my kids watch bands. They were out the front for Jess Mauboy and they're just crazy for Leo Sayer."

As finale artist Jon Stevens says, "This is the quintessential Aussie music festival." OR



TIPS & TRICKS

- Lock in the next festival date: August 19-21, 2027.
- Use the My NRMA app to help plan your trip and get the best fuel and accom offers
- Visit the First-Timers page on the festival website: **mundimundibash.com.au**.
- Check for road closures after rain and be patient at fuel stops and during entry/exit.
- Pre-order firewood, which is delivered to your site, and take a log splitter.
- Sign-up for the charity events and save on cooking by supporting food vendors.
- Allow time to explore Broken Hill, Silverton and surrounding towns.