

Mind the sand trap

Play the world's longest golf course across the Nullarbor

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I know this is the outback when I stand on the first tee of the Kalgoorlie Golf Course, a premier club in Western Australia, and see green grass fairways bounded by red ochre sand and dirt. I don't realise I will not see green grass again until I reach the 18th hole of the Nullarbor Links, the longest golf course in the world, 1365km away at Ceduna, South Australia.

To many Australians, driving the Eyre Highway across the Nullarbor Plain is a bucket-list item. To golfers, there is the added attraction of 18 well thought out, but quirky holes to play along the way.

My husband Lex and I don't want to rush our trip so we allow a few days in Kal, as the locals call it. The city is all about gold, from the glitter in shop windows, to men in big boots, to the Super Pit initiated by Alan Bond in 1988. It's mind-blowing to stand on the edge of a man-made pit so big that massive dump trucks look like toys.

Golfers need to buy a scorecard and have it stamped at all 18 holes to qualify for a Certificate of Completion. If travelling east to west you buy it at Ceduna. In Kalgoorlie the card is for sale at the historic Town Hall. Step outside to the statue of Paddy Hannan who found the first gold here in 1893. Take a drink from the waterbag he holds and appreciate it because this water has travelled 600km along a pipe from Perth. You have just started a journey where water is so scarce it nominally becomes more precious than gold.

After holes one and two at Kalgoorlie we play the third, a Par 4, at Kambalda where we have our first experience of a synthetic tee and a sand green. Fortunately we have been told to keep the caps from our wine bottles to tee up because it's impossible to push a normal tee into the synthetic grass. Also, you're allowed to tee up on the fairways that from here to Ceduna have been left natural and are rock hard. Today's tinny wine bottle caps don't last long when being whacked by a club, so we agree we must keep drinking to top up our supply.

This area is part of the Great Western Woodlands, the largest temperate woodland remaining on Earth — 16,000,000ha and larger than England. It's a "carbon bank" with an estimated 950 million tonnes stored in vegetation and soil, and a haven for many rare animals. We play two holes at Norseman, then start our eastward journey along the longest, straightest, flattest highway I have driven.

The road is named after Edward John Eyre, the first European to cross the Nullarbor in 1840-41. From Norseman to Ceduna, roadhouses and farm stays provide accommodation and meals. After Eucla the highway crosses the Nullarbor (Latin for "no tree") and the scrub is the silvery colour of bluebush and saltbush, which sur-

vive well in the arid, salty conditions. I find myself peering into the scrub hoping to see a kangaroo, camel or one of the southern hairy nose wombats that thrive in these conditions, but none appears. Occasional fences indicate cattle or sheep stations, but I hardly see any of these animals either. Sadly, the only wildlife I spot is road kill.

The golf course holes have names, not numbers, and at every tee there is a noticeboard telling the story of a local event or legend. The Golden Horse is named after the prospector's steed that pawed the ground and exposed a gold seam; Skylab is where the US space station broke up and fell to ground and US president Jimmy Carter apologised to Australia while the shire ranger handed the director of NASA a littering ticket (later withdrawn). Brumby's Run is where in the 1870s horses were bred for the British Imperial Indian Army; and Nullarbor Nymph is where a story originated, after a few beers in the bar at Eucla, that a half-naked woman with long blonde hair was running wild with the kangaroos. The story attracted journalists from around the world. Tourism boomed and lots of money was made; until the hoax was exposed.

The concept for the course was the brainchild of two entrepreneurs and a politician. Bob Bongiorno, manager of the Balladonia Roadhouse, needed to create a reason for people to stop and spend a little money. He came up with the golf-course idea and approached Alf Caputo, chairman of Kalgoorlie Goldfields Tourism, who had been trying for years to get tourists to turn right at Norseman (to Kalgoorlie) not left (to Esperance and the beach). They talked to local politician John Bowler who saw merit in the idea and secured enough money for a feasibility study, which came in positive.

He received a grant of \$341,000 from the federal government, enough to build 11 new holes at participating roadhouses and farms along the highway, and update two greens at Norseman. With two holes each at the Kalgoorlie and Ceduna golf clubs and one at Kambalda, they had their 18-hole, 6133m, Par 72 golf course. It was launched in 2009.

The first overnight stop in our campervan is at Fraser Range Station, 105km east of Norseman. It provides accommodation in the old shearers' quarters and self-contained cottages as well as a pleasant camping ground where the powered sites have bushy dividers for privacy. Next morning we drive to the back paddock to play Sheep's Back, a Par 3, pleasantly placed on the flat with low hills beyond. Future holes become more problematic. At the next, Skylab, another Par 3, the green is out of sight

The Skylab hole is where the US space station broke up and fell to ground. The shire ranger handed the director of NASA a littering ticket



SUE LOWE

Kalgoorlie Golf Course, the western start of the Nullarbor Links, main; pygmy possum in a plastic-pipe haven at Eyre Bird Observatory, above; whales surface at Head of Bight, below right; the author prepares to play the Dingo's Den hole, below left.

over trees and scrub. I have been warned to "fly high" but my ball goes wild and is lost. Lex prudently chips along the path for a safe four.

After two more holes, we reach the turn-off to the Eyre Bird Observatory, the oldest in Australia. We drive along a dirt road to the top of the escarpment where we are met and taken by 4WD over coastal plains and magnificent dunes to a charming limestone building with deep verandas. It dates back to 1897 when it served in the line of telegraph stations built along the coast. The observatory is manned by volunteers and we're lucky enough to be here with Jude and Bill Dolence who feed us wonderful meals in front of an open fire and let us help with the daily bird count and weather report. Bill shows us various projects the observatory undertakes and we all agree our favourite is the plastic-pipe home made to keep tiny pygmy possums safe from predators.

Back on the highway we play another four holes with side trips to the coast to see the spectacular Bunda Cliffs, then we're at the Head of the Bight and the turn-off to the whale-watching platforms. The mighty Southern Right whales come here to mate and calve from May to October and I spend a heartwarming 20 minutes watching two of these giants rise and sink, blow and flip a tail.

Our next stop is Coorabie Farm and it's the last day of shearing so we're invited to join a barbecue and swap tall tales. Owners Deb and Pogy Kloock are fourth-generation farmers and welcome visitors in quintessential country style. Deb has compiled the farm's history in photo books and Pogy has collected all sorts of relics which, along with the sheep yards, dogs and small horses, add charm to this experience. Accommodation ranges from single rooms to a villa and camp sites.

The Par 4 Windmills at Penang, and the last two holes of the Nullarbor Links on green grass at Ceduna complete our round and I proudly collect my Certificate of Completion.

As the perfect finish to our journey we park our campervan at a site atop a sand dune at the up-market Shelly Beach Caravan Park. We have unhampered views across the bay to Ceduna so each night we set up our table and chairs, put out freshly shucked oysters and cheeses and watch the sun set. We don't need any more bottle caps but we open a wine anyway.

- nullarborlinks.com
- australiagoldenoutback.com
- birdlife.org.au
- cedunacarvanpark.com.au



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