



Into the Never- Never Land

Pamela Wade journeys through time and space in the South Australian Outback.

PAMELA WADE IS A *NORTH & SOUTH* CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAMELA WADE AND GETTY IMAGES.

“Did you mean ‘eremophobia?’” Google asks helpfully when I type in “eremophilia”. No, thanks, I don’t. It’s “love of open spaces” that I’m after, not “fear of being alone, of deserted places”. I’m extrapolating from my newly learnt botanical term, *eremophila*, which describes desert-loving plants. After a few days in South Australia’s Outback, I’ve decided that *eremophile* is the word for me.

“Cheap” is another. At Adelaide Railway Station, I peep into the fancy cabins in the front half of *The Ghan*: there’s wood panelling, clubby-looking green seats, even coffee tables and an ensuite. That’s Platinum class; then there’s Gold, a bit smaller, less plush; then Red, more coffin-like but still private; and

then there’s me, in a carriage right down the back with the huddled masses. But that’s all right: I’m not doing the epic two-nighter all the way to Darwin, just four hours up the line.

At the junction of routes criss-crossing the continent at the tip of the Spencer Gulf’s great gash into the coast of South Australia, Port Augusta is a town made by, and for, people passing through. Today it still seems little more than a refuelling stop, and in five minutes I’ve exhausted the delights of the, er, CBD. Then I discover the Wadlata Outback Centre – something that’s finally made the town a destination in itself.

Stepping through the mouth of the rainbow serpent inside, I’m plunged into the Outback’s own story, cleverly told. It starts with dinosaurs and Dreamtime, fauna and

flora – the *eremophilas* – and then tracks the imprint made by people on the land. At first, the paths were invisible, made by barefoot Aboriginals; then came trails blazed by some of Australia’s biggest names in exploration – Eyre, Giles, Sturt and Stuart – on foot, horses and camels. Next were farmers, shearers and miners, the path becoming a road; and finally rail reached the town, from Sydney to Perth, and Adelaide to Darwin.

Man pitted against one of the planet’s harshest environments is the stuff of drama, and the early European history is full of ripping yarns. Captain Charles Sturt, hauling a boat for months as he looked for a non-existent inland sea, finally gave up when his thermometer burst at 52°C, calling it “a journey through Hell”. But even those



Clancy is seven months old, full of mischief, and already assigned to Cannard's baby son River.



Graham Cannard has worked in the Middle East as a camel-racing trainer and is also a rodeo bronco rider.

coming later, with roads to follow, struggled with heat, droughts, fire, floods and isolation. Mostly, though, they struggled with themselves and what Wadlata describes as “landscapes of the mind”; as much a barrier to success as the actual environment: fighting it rather than working with it. Unsuitable crops failed, sheep stripped the vegetation leaving a wasteland beyond recovery, and rabbits, goats, cats and foxes were introduced with hope that turned to horror.

Despite great courage and determination, it was a story that seemed unlikely to end well but then came 20th-century technology, and everything changed. Pedal-power radios, the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the School of the Air were vital steps in making the Outback liveable; and the display ends with the monster machines used at the mines to rip riches from the earth.

Driving east along a ribbon of road through the ancient landscape, however, dispels any notion the Outback has finally been tamed. Quite simply, it's too big. But it's also beautiful, the soil deep red, the time-worn rocks flickering along the edges where orange meets the cobalt of the sky arching overhead, a great blue bowl from horizon to horizon.

Turning off the highway at the township of Quorn, I meet Graham Cannard. Tall, lean and weather-beaten, he's spent most of his life out in this desert, generally atop its most recognisable symbol. A fourth-generation cameleer, if he weren't so classically laconic, he would be raving about the virtues of this ungainly beast. Instead, he just says, “A camel's the ultimate all-terrain vehicle,” adding

dismissively, “and much smarter than a horse.” Rather less comfortable to ride, though, I think but don't say as I lurch after him on Feral through leathery mallee scrub, up and down rocky hills.

Cannard is totally at home, both on his camel Rex and in the bush, and his sons aged five and six are growing up the same way, allowed to explore off by themselves, and learning to handle the animal so essential to the opening up of the Outback. Once trucks and trains arrived, however, the camels were turned loose to fend for themselves and were so successful they now number over a million. The government is planning a cull and Cannard is disgusted: “They're the only wild camels left in the world.”

As I carry on towards the Flinders Ranges, I see another wild animal that shouldn't be here: a feral cat standing boldly beside the road. It's big, solid and confident, and when I mention it later to local guide Jaz Blazey, she curses. “We've got about 12 million of those in the arid zone,” she says, but more colourfully, and tells me about Operation Bounceback, a major conservation programme operating for 20 years now in this area, reducing the exotic pests that endanger native species.

We're driving along a gorge on a journey through time, from one geological age to another, rocks 580 million years old on one side, 650 million on the other. It's a real-life theme park for earth scientists, but though I nod solemnly at the big numbers, it's when Blazey stops at a tumbled cliff-face that I get really excited. There, busily nibbling at



Above: Graham Cannard's camel tours include evening barbecues and longer safaris, sleeping in a swag in the bush.



Above and right: An aerial view of Wilpena Pound is the best way to appreciate its ancient 80sq km expanse. Surprisingly, it is not a volcanic crater.



the sparse vegetation are yellow-footed rock wallabies, half a dozen of the 800 now living in the area thanks to Bounceback, which was instituted when their numbers fell to a shocking 50. Chubby and fluffy, with long, striped tails, they're the essence of cuteness and I watch entranced as they hop about unperturbed by our presence.

For me, they're the yang to the yin of the rocks, a soft and cuddly counterpoint to the eternal and impassive presence of the bones of the landscape that are so exposed here. After a day driving with Blazey through gorges and dry creek beds, over bare hills with such long views that eternity becomes a manageable concept, and ending with a sunset suffusing the ranges with every shade of orange and purple, I'm feeling rather insignificant.

That night John Williamson is singing at Wilpena Resort and I sit in the lounge listening to his simple lyrics – "Sunburnt country wisely named/Chisel-ploughed and wire-claimed/But never, never, never tamed" – and know that I'm not alone in feeling awed by this land.

In the morning, there's excitement at breakfast: 8mm of rain has fallen overnight. It's only a few months since the 13 days when the temperature didn't drop below 41°C, so this is an event. It's certainly made a difference outside, and when I take an early morning walk into the huge natural amphitheatre of Wilpena Pound, I'm delighted by the unsuspected beauty of the wet eucalypt trunks gleaming gold, silver and green. Kangaroos are grazing underneath them and the musical call of magpies echoes through the

branches. But there's heartbreak here too: at the abandoned Hill Homestead in the gateway to the Pound, I read about the dogged hard work of the farmer and his sons building a road through the Gap, hauling tree trunks to ram into place, only to have the whole lot cruelly swept away by a flood soon after, the last straw for them. "Imagine even trying to grow wheat down there," the pilot comments unsympathetically as I flight-see over Wilpena later: tourism succeeding where farming failed.

Driving away again, I stop at tiny Hawker, population 319, and inspect the museum in the petrol station. Fred Teague's entertaining collection includes a dog's wooden leg (the original lost in a dingo trap), a stuffed bandicoot, a handbook on *Uranium Prospecting in South Australia* complete with Geiger counter, and a home-made snake-bite kit. Over the road is another wonder. Local artist Jeff Morgan has painted a 360-degree panorama of Wilpena Pound, a 30m ring inside a round building, and it's brilliant: 13 months spent recreating one of the Outback's mysterious marvels, seen from its highest point.

I get back behind the wheel for the long return trip to Port Augusta, at the end of a road that's lined with shattered dreams: the stone shells of homes and farm buildings where brave hopes and unremitting toil came to nothing. And yet, though the roofless ruins are proof the Outback will not tolerate the misguided, for those who understand this unforgiving environment and treat it with respect, its vast sky, distant horizons and stark beauty reward them with a peace and a space

that eases the soul. I remember a snatch of poetry I read at the Wadlata Centre: "My home lies wide a thousand miles/In the Never-Never Land," wrote Henry Lawson 100 years ago: a fellow eremophile if ever there was one.

• *Pamela Wade was a guest of the South Australia Tourism Commission.*

Getting There & About

The Ghan: www.gsr.com.au
Budget Rent a Car: Port Augusta
www.budget.com.au
Return by coach or air:
www.wadlata.sa.gov.au/transport.phtml

Best Sleeps

Oasis Apartments, Port Augusta
www.majestichotels.com.au
Rawnsley Park Station, Wilpena Pound
www.rawnsleypark.com.au
Wilpena Pound Resort
www.wilpenapound.com.au

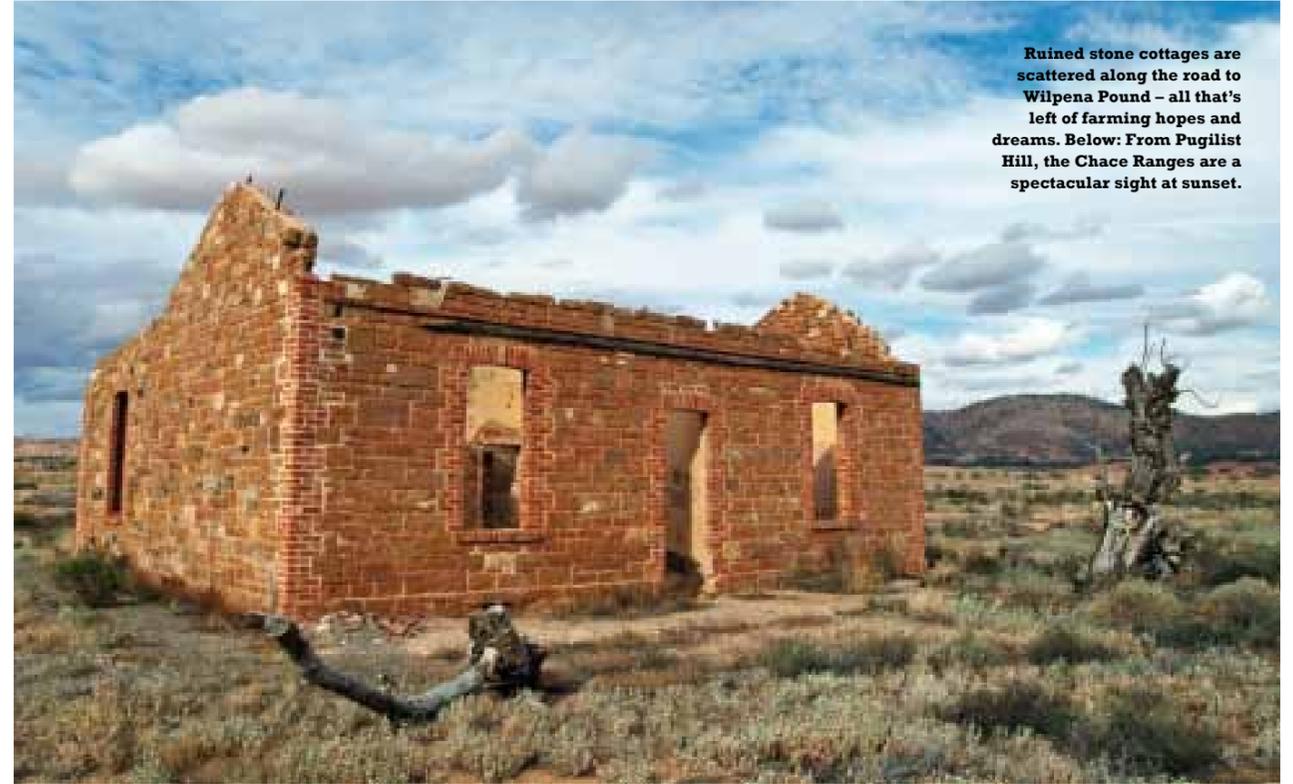
To Do

Wadlata Outback Centre, Port Augusta
www.wadlata.sa.gov.au
Pichi Richi Camel Tours, Quorn
www.pichirichicameltours.com

Flight-seeing and guided 4WD tours can be arranged through both Wilpena Pound Resort and Rawnsley Park Station.

For further information

www.southaustralia.co.nz +



Ruined stone cottages are scattered along the road to Wilpena Pound – all that's left of farming hopes and dreams. Below: From Pugilist Hill, the Chace Ranges are a spectacular sight at sunset.

