

Lake Eyre and Australia's greatest underground town, Coober Pedy, head the highlights, but there's time on the ground for walks, 4WD tours, glamping and some out-back pub experiences. The outlook changes with a few days in Port Lincoln on the Eyre Peninsula, where the seafood shines, including at a masterclass with chef Kris Bunders

of by the usual launch. Accredited naturalists lead guests around the island, which is a veritable sanctuary for endangered species such as Tamar wallabies, Flinders wombats and even Tasmanian devils. B&R also has a high-end version of the popular Three Capes Walk near Port Arthur, utilising new fully catered private lodges, and time at the exquisite

at the height of the Cold War or that an air defence HQ was built beneath St James Station. The tour will inspect underground command stations that would have run the battle had Sydney been attacked, go behind the scenes at Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park, and visit air raid shelters in the Domain, the RAN Heritage Centre on Garden Island and have a private viewing of memorabilia and docu-



# Spirited through the outback in style

LEE MYLNE

Breakfast is served just before Blackwater. After a night of slumbering through the rockin' rollin' motion of the train, low fog obscures my view from the window. I soon discover we're about 190km west of Rockhampton and the trains swishing past are laden with coal from seven nearby mines.

It's the third time I've travelled on the Spirit of the Outback, one of Queensland's five long-distance trains, and the memories are flashing through my mind as quickly as the landscape passes the window of the Tuckerbox dining car.



After pulling out of Brisbane's Roma Street station at 6.10pm, we've tracked north through the night to Rockhampton, the half-way-point of the 1325km journey to the town of Longreach.

Before dawn, the train turns west, and the daylight hours are what I've been waiting for.

I first made this trip on Spirit of the Outback's inaugural journey in November 1993. Not much has changed, although the passengers are less exuberant and less numerous.

That momentous trip was notable for the presence of a host of journalists, celebrities and politicians, including the towering figure of former prime minister Gough Whitlam and

his wife, Margaret, both train buffs, all set to celebrate the glamorous new train service.

The decor features stock brands from six cattle stations between Rockhampton and Longreach, the carriage walls hung with evocative black-and-white outback scenes and tributes to Australian legends: explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, bushranger Harry Readford, poet Banjo Paterson.

My cabin is dedicated to Christina Macpherson, the young woman who first belted out Waltzing Matilda on the piano at Winton's North Gregory Hotel.

Our progress is punctuated by the flash of small towns built as construction of the Central Railway Line crept westward between 1867 and 1892. At 9.30am, we pull into Emer-

ald for passengers to board and alight. There's 10 minutes to stretch our legs and admire the lovely colonial station building.

Next, the gemfields hamlet of Anakie. Blink and you've missed it. Then Bogantungan — "what's left of it," says a crew member — and the cemetery beside the tracks seems to confirm that assessment. I roll the name around on my tongue.

Everything is by the clock, mealtimes in two sittings. From the galley, under chef Catherine O'Reilly, comes Steak Diane, roast pork, vegetarian lasagne, barramundi, rich chocolate cake and sticky date pudding. The food is excellent.

Pandemic-era travel restrictions have cut the number of passengers in half and there's

■ [hiddenitary.com.au](http://hiddenitary.com.au)

**THE LONG WAY AROUND** Silversea's 144-berth Silver Explorer has made many Arctic and Antarctic visits, and it brings this aura of expedition cruising coated with luxury to a 25-day jaunt between Melbourne and Darwin. The itinerary avoids city ports to drop into places such as Port Lincoln (where the

no dining with strangers, so I'm solo at a white-clothed table for four, shamelessly eavesdropping.

Over lunch, across the aisle, a mother and daughter chat about bucket lists and a couple are planning their next trip, to Hervey Bay and Fraser Island.

The hours tick by. Gazing at the changing panorama outside, I'm never bored.

A pair of emus, red eyes fixed on each other, unperturbed by the passing train. A kookaburra peering down into the dining car. Kangaroos bounding through the dry scrub. Some unfortunate road kill. The occasional caravan hightailing it along parallel bitumen. Bottle trees. Splashy yellow flowers. Knee-high termite mounds. Long dirt driveways leading ... where? Dry creeks and riverbeds, but some dams holding water. Above, wheeling kestrels.

A brief stop at Alpha. Beyond Jericho, a herd of horses gallops through the bush.

By the mountains, there's a lot of NSW not easily accessed, so the Classic Safari Company gets you to its corners by small plane (10 passengers). First stop is Mungo National Park, where the other-worldly landscape would be the star even without the anthropological history that has traced human existence back 50,000 years. The skies and the hats get bigger over the next few days as you hop via Broken Hill

As the sun sets, we pass through Barcaldine, birthplace of the Australian Labor Party, and Ilfracombe, established on what was once the world's largest sheep station. We pull into Longreach nearly 60 minutes short of our 26 scheduled hours and I alight with a head full of images.

The next day, I hear the toot of the train as it leaves Longreach bound for Brisbane, and later overtake it as I drive east to Barcaldine. I'm wandering the main street when it pulls into the station, right next to the Tree of Knowledge memorial.

The windows are shaded so I can't see inside. Then I realise, I don't need to.

■ [queenslandrailtravel.com.au](http://queenslandrailtravel.com.au)

*Lee Mylne was a guest of Queensland Rail Travel.*

**Spirit of the Outback on track in Queensland**

ing specialist Botanica visits several sites not otherwise open to the public such as Hidden Valley, a naturalist garden with many unique Norfolk species. They can include the eponymous pine and palm to the spectacular flowering white oak, a unique hibiscus and the world's tallest tree ferns. There are also plenty of touchpoints to Norfolk's convict and Bounty past, plus its unique customs. Departs Sydney in April, May and October

rainforest by river and rail, finishing on King Island for a gastronomic overnighter. From \$5700 a person, twin-share. For a different mood, you can get around the lack of scheduled transport services to Birdsville for its iconic Outback race meeting (September 3 next year) on Captain's Choice VIP day trip, sandwiched between two nights in Brisbane. From \$3400 a person, twin-share.

■ [captainschoice.com.au](http://captainschoice.com.au)

