



ANYTHING BUT PLAIN

Heather Zubek tackles the world's longest golf course and meets some larger-than-life characters along the way.



The view isn't that great from the back seat of the 4WD, but I'm doing my best to scan the road for oncoming roos. It's about 10pm and the locals had warned us that the stretch of road just outside Norseman is notorious for kangaroos crossing. We have a two-hour drive ahead of us and we don't want to run into any distractions.

The flash of light takes us all by surprise. What happens next is literally out of this world. For a brief moment the sky lights up with an eerie green glow. It's a meteor, apparently. If this fiery chunk of space rock plunging towards earth had fallen near an urban centre, it would have barely been noticeable. However, out here on the Nullarbor, in the middle of the night, it enters the earth's atmosphere in a blaze of cosmic glory.

On the Nullarbor Plain everything is larger than life. The distances are vast, the space seems endless, the stories are beyond belief and the people are indeed extraordinary.

The trek oft travelled across the continent is well known for being miles of boredom, broken only by the rush of wind from a passing road train. The drive is something to be endured. The police force is tired

of the many fatalities from the deadly combination of speed and fatigue.

A few years ago, two friends, businessmen Alf Caputo and Bob Bongiorno, devised a plan over a bottle of red at the Balladonia Roadhouse that would not only slow drivers but also help businesses along the Eyre Highway. By the next morning the idea was set in motion and the Nullarbor Links golf course was born.

"It's a huge road and the drive is boring," says Alf of traversing the Nullarbor. "With our idea, people now get to stop and rest, as well as play a game of golf." ➔

NO ORDINARY GAME OF GOLF

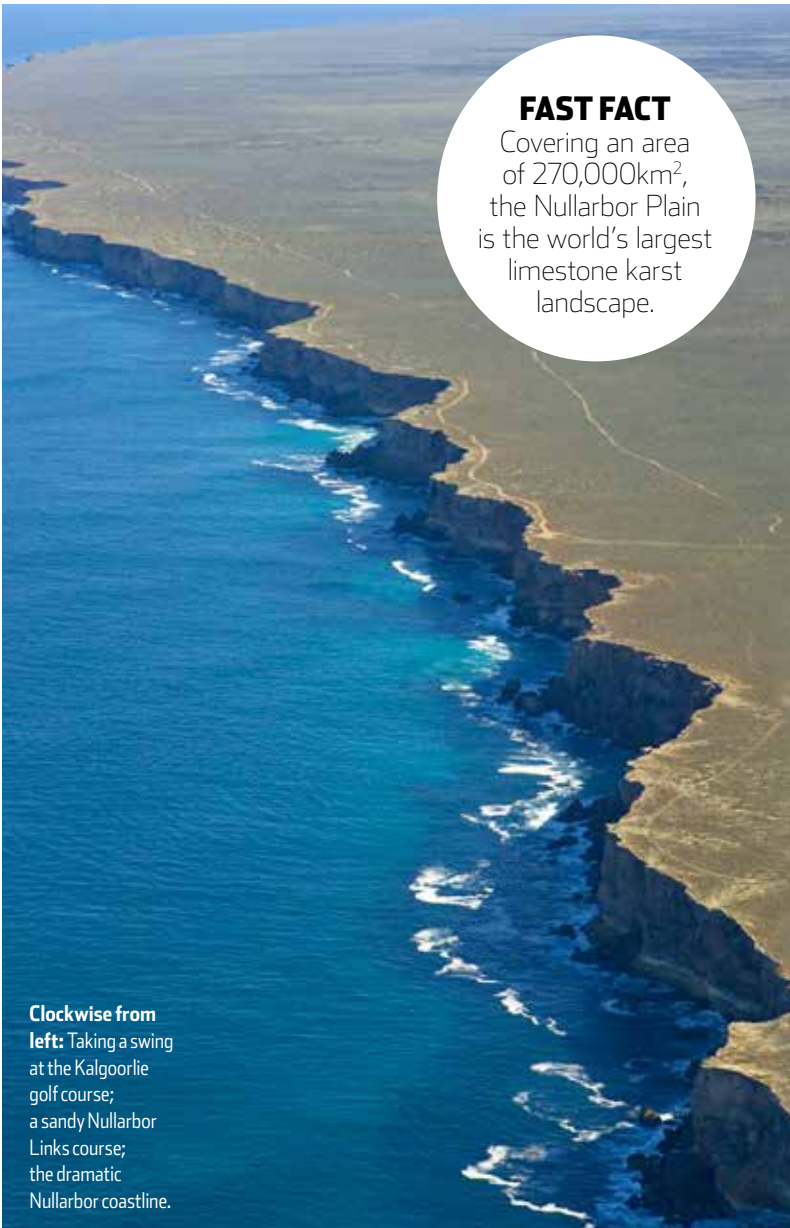
The Nullarbor Links is an 18-hole, par-72 golf course situated along 1,365 kilometres of the Eyre Highway, with one hole in each participating town or roadhouse along the highway from Ceduna (South Australia) to Kalgoorlie (Western Australia). No buggy is required. Reported to be the longest golf course in the world, the Nullarbor Links not only spreads across two states but also across two time zones.

Officially opened in October 2009, the golf course incorporates seven holes from existing courses and ➔





Image: Nullarbor Links



FAST FACT
Covering an area of 270,000km², the Nullarbor Plain is the world's largest limestone karst landscape.

Clockwise from left: Taking a swing at the Kalgoorlie golf course; a sandy Nullarbor Links course; the dramatic Nullarbor coastline.

Image: South Australian Tourism Commission

11 newly created ones beside roadhouses and rest stops. Many of the tees and greens are constructed from artificial turf. A bit of 'Aussie ingenuity' is required when playing – the use of bottle tops is recommended on the tees and fairways, especially if you don't want to ruin your clubs on the rocky desert terrain.

The Nullarbor Links is a truly Australian golfing experience and the main reason for my drive across the continent. It involves playing an average of five holes per day, with a 100-kilometre drive between each hole. It's characterised by strong winds, ball-thieving crows, curious emus, hissing lizards and poisonous snakes but also breathtaking views and bragging rights at every 19th hole in the country.

Crossing the Nullarbor Plain is considered by many travellers as a 'once is enough' event, but not so for Marg and Eric Donkin of Kambalda, who travel the endless stretch of the Nullarbor Links every eight weeks in their role as maintenance crew for the golf course. The duo regularly makes the return journey from Kalgoorlie to Ceduna, mowing, compacting and cleaning as they go.

"We leave early Friday morning and return the following Tuesday," says Marg, who admits to taking her clubs along for the ride. "We don't get to play all the time as we're usually too busy cleaning the course."

"We just do general maintenance," says Eric, who admits he is more at home with his sports pistol than his golf clubs.

"We enjoy coming out here," says Marg. "We get to meet heaps of people playing the course, and lots of non-golfers giving it a go, too. I think the non-golfers have a better time because they don't take it too seriously."

CROSSING THE BORDER

Our first day on the golf course includes playing holes in small South Australian towns such as Ceduna and the whistlestops of Penong and Nundroo. Just outside Nundroo is the perfect spot for viewing the dramatic edge of Australia along the Great Australian Bight. From June to October southern right whales can be seen with their calves enjoying the waters. Sturdy wooden boardwalks and viewing platforms provide a front-row seat for visitors and the day's golf score is forgotten with the flip of a whale's tail.

Crossing the border into Western Australia, we soon reach Eucla, population 45. Rasa Patupis, owner of the Amber Motor Hotel, takes us to the beach where she played as a child among the pylons of the old jetty used during the days of sandalwood farming. Rasa's young daughter, Amber, acts as our guide, showing us her ocean playground as well as the ruins of the old telegraph station.

Decades of vandalism in the form of travellers' carved initials reveal the story of the attempt to bring communication to the heart of the Nullarbor. In its ☛



heyday in the late 1800s more than 600 telegrams a day passed through this station. Today, the sands are destined to cover it entirely.

In the 1960s Rasa's father was a truckie regularly making trips across the Nullarbor. The telegraph station at Eucla was one of his swimming spots.

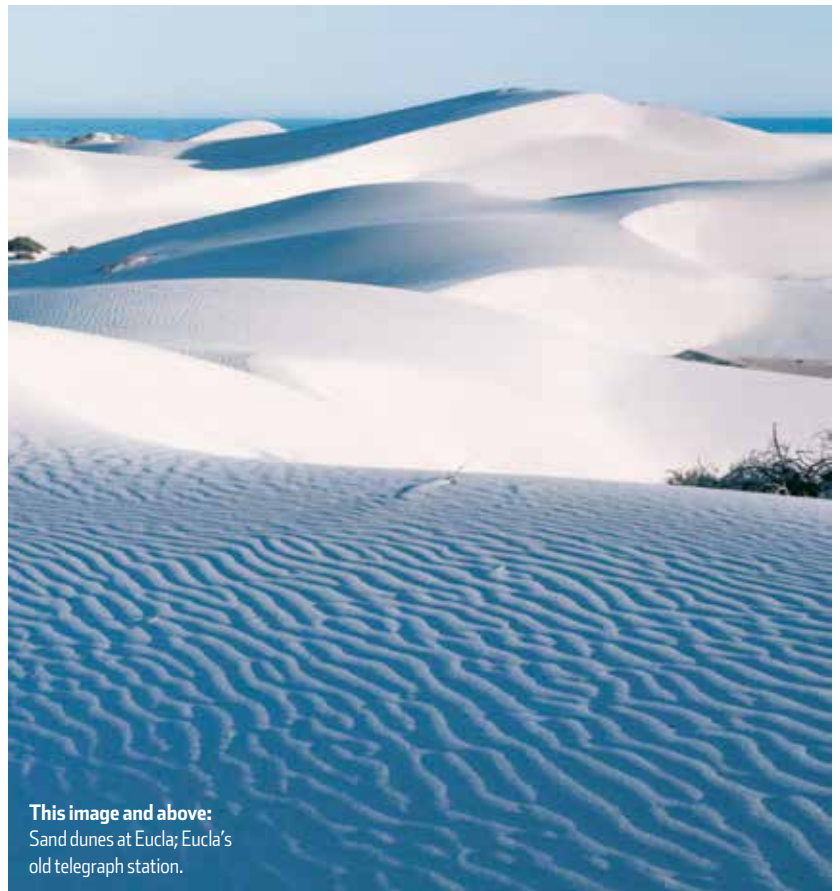
"When he was at the train station in Adelaide he picked up *The Australian* newspaper," Rasa says. "He read that Eucla was under tender to be developed because the governor at the time came through and wasn't happy with the lack of facilities for travellers." So Rasa's father moved to Eucla and built the motel and restaurant that Rasa, her partner Paul and daughter Amber run today.

Despite living in a small, isolated community, Rasa doesn't feel there are any challenges. "It's what you make of it," she says. "You have to be really organised to ensure the infrastructure is sorted, but it's a wonderful lifestyle. We go fishing and surfing as a family and we meet up with other families along the highway."

STRAIGHT ON TO BALLADONIA

The Nullarbor begins to open up to us now as we travel for 500 kilometres, playing golf through Mundrabilla, Madura and Cocklebiddy. The drive seems endless while the straightest stretch of road in the world disappears into the horizon, until we turn into Balladonia.

Balladonia is a small roadhouse community with a population of about 20. It was made famous in 1979 when debris from NASA's Skylab space station landed nearby. In the small museum located within the roadhouse are exhibits related to the area's historical Afghan cameleers, the Red X car race and the Skylab incident. Balladonia's Nullarbor Links hole is appropriately called Skylab, an easy par 3 across corrugated terrain with a huge red bullseye near the green – for the golfers or NASA Mission Control, I'm not quite sure. ☺



This image and above: Sand dunes at Eucla; Eucla's old telegraph station.

Images: Tourism WA

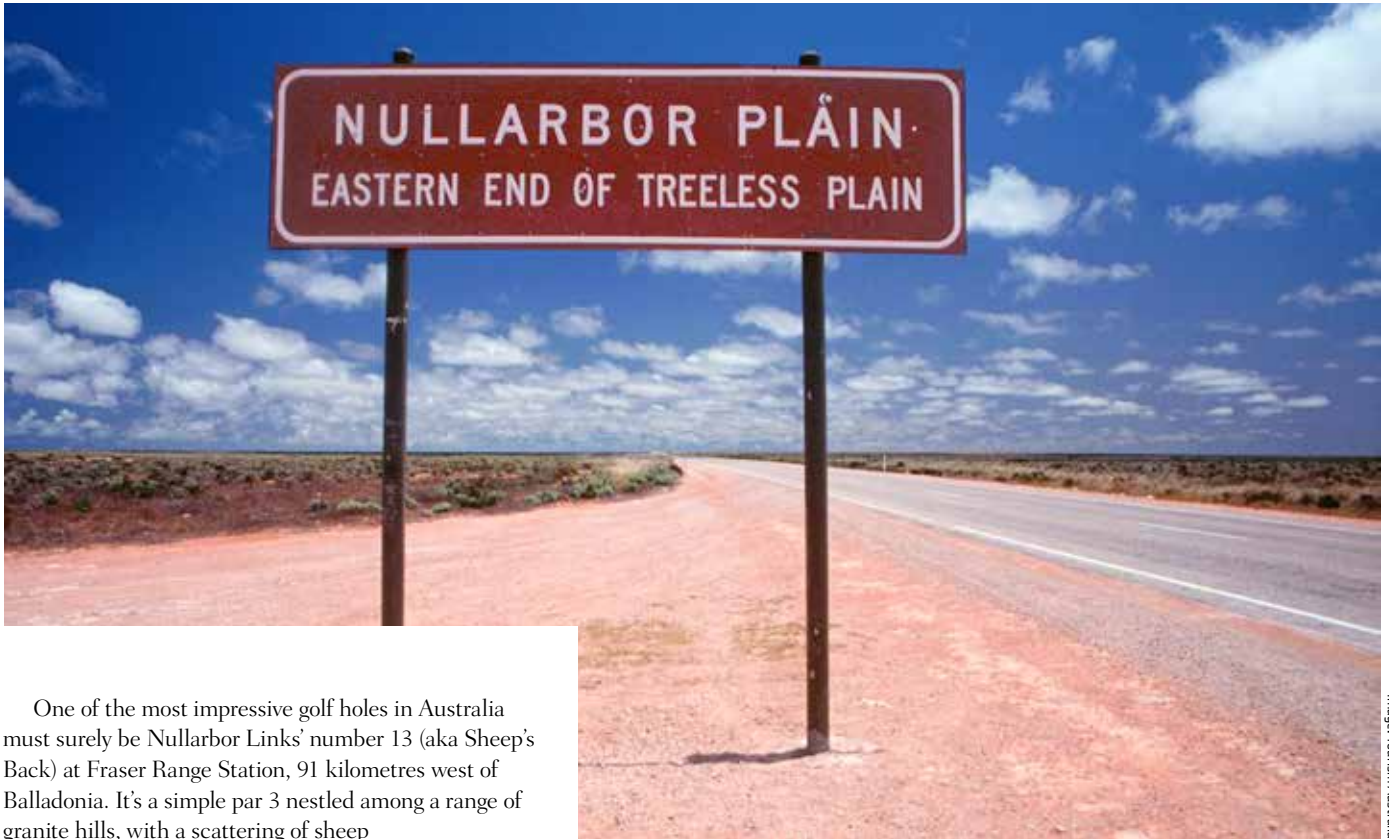


Image: Tourism Australia

One of the most impressive golf holes in Australia must surely be Nullarbor Links' number 13 (aka Sheep's Back) at Fraser Range Station, 91 kilometres west of Balladonia. It's a simple par 3 nestled among a range of granite hills, with a scattering of sheep and a family of emus that watches on with interest.

Fraser Range Station has a general store and accommodation and is managed by Allan and Maria Evans. Having managed a cattle station east of Kalgoorlie, Allan is used to life on an isolated station, but luckily for him there's no more being knocked about by cattle or arduous fencing jobs to attend to.

Allan and Maria's days are filled with cleaning rooms, ordering supplies, taking bookings and ensuring guests are happy. Allan also takes guided tours of the property.

"The place is full of history," he says. "I take a tour down to the old dam wall, which was constructed by convict labourers in the late 1800s. The Sunset Tour is also interesting, as the colours of the area at that time of the day are quite something."

Driving into the historical goldmining town of Norseman, we are greeted by tin camels and a bronze statue of the horse after which the town was named. The quiet, wide streets and sun-faded wooden cottages belie the fact that the area was the second richest goldfield in Western Australia.

We play the two holes at Norseman Golf Club, carefully avoiding the ants' nests and the greenkeeper who drives his tractor around the fairways in a blaze of red dust.

Even though we have yet to play the Nullarbor Links holes in Kambalda and Kalgoorlie, we've come to the end of our journey across the Nullarbor Plain – the plain officially ends in Norseman, according to the certificate and bumper stickers we buy from the Norseman Visitors Centre. We've crossed one of the most isolated places on earth, yet the area buzzes with road trains, campervans, golfers and even solitary cyclists – all part of a community of travellers making the Nullarbor Plain extraordinary. [📍](#)

Above: The long, flat stretch of road that crosses the Nullarbor.

Round-up

STAY

Amber Motor Hotel
Eyre Highway, Eucla
08 9039 3468

Fraser Range Station
Eyre Highway, halfway between Balladonia and Norseman
08 9039 3210, www.fraserangestation.com.au

EAT & DRINK

Amber Motor Hotel Restaurant
Eyre Highway, Eucla
08 9039 3468

Balladonia Hotel Motel Restaurant
Eyre Highway, Balladonia
08 9039 3453, www.balladoniahotelmotel.com.au

EXPLORE

Nullarbor Links golf course
www.nullarborlinks.com

South Australian Whale Centre
See southern right whales from June to October.
www.sawhalecentre.com

Balladonia Museum
Balladonia Hotel Motel complex
Eyre Highway, Balladonia
08 9039 3453, www.balladoniahotelmotel.com.au

MORE INFO

www.australia.com/explore/itineraries/crossing-nullarbor.aspx