

After a three week Queensland safari in September, **Shelley Ross** reckons that the secret to keeping everybody happy is to mix up the viewing. After low level croc spotting at Cooktown to postcard coral reef cruising, she's most drawn to an unlikely candidate ... the outback town of Longreach.

Outback Drawcard

It's pretty unusual to be able to call any town an aviator's paradise. Well, actually, that's not entirely true if I'm being honest. Any town beyond a comfortable driving distance—which for me is about an hour—calls for serious consideration as a flying destination. But to find a struggling, bone dry outback town like Longreach in central Queensland that embraces its rich aviation history and shares it so impressively with visitors, is surely a no-brainer for a pilot's wish list. And I'm happy to go out on a limb here and suggest that this place is even going to get the thumbs-up

from those non-pilot passengers of yours too.

See, when you're planning a flying itinerary, it's all about balance. As much as I love pretty much everywhere I visit because I've actually managed to find it and survive the landing, you can't expect the Princess or the Earthbound Bloke in your life to get excited about the next invitation into that right-hand seat if all you offer them are spooky aero clubs with nobody home and last month's milk in the fridge. Whacko, I bet they can't wait for the next stop – maybe you can take them to see a decrepit old warbird with its

prop missing, languishing in thigh-high grass in some stricken paddock way west of nowhere. Take loads of time telling them its extensive history over a stale muesli bar and they'll sign up on the spot for way more of this action.

So let's try and think about incorporating destinations that everybody is going to enjoy. The way I see it, 37,000 visitors a year to Longreach can't be wrong, and after spending two nights here, I can vouch for its attraction. Since it's slap bang in the middle of the sunshine state, you can approach it from any angle you like.

Getting there

With a crew of seven, we'd taken a week to fly a C172 and a GA8 Airvan up the western side of Queensland to Cape York, then flew down the east coast, stopping for a couple of nights each at Cooktown, Cairns, Shute Harbour and Rockhampton. In a word – spectacular. Seriously, if you haven't done this coastal flight, have a think about planning it. I'm only sorry we didn't have time to go visit any of the Whitsunday islands. Next time.



Don't miss a visit to Longreach's Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame.



You'll find Class C, D and military airspace along the route, but with some dedicated homework, it's all straightforward and so worth the effort. You've seen all the Queensland tourism ads, you don't need me to tell you the Coral Sea coast looks even better from 1000 feet over the beach. If you're apprehensive about your route through unfamiliar territory, remember you can always do as we did and request a Flight Following service. It will be dependent on ATC's workload at the time but we requested this between Townsville and Rockhampton and they were happy to provide the service.

The Old Station delivers again

So after a week of warm salty air and sea breezes, we thought we'd head inland after Rocky to pay a visit to the Creed family on The Old Station at Raglan. I didn't really think things could get much better at this place, but every time I bring new people here, I see nothing but massive smiles and hear nothing but genuine raving about the magnificent setting and the Creed's unique bush hospitality. There's just something memorable about landing on a bush strip that's maintained better than

your own front lawn, then parking your aeroplane ten steps from your bed, the bar and usually a piece of magnificent home grown beef.

The Creeds hold an annual fly-in and heritage show at The Old Station over the last weekend every May, in an effort to raise money for the Capricorn Helicopter Rescue Service. So if you don't mind bedding down in a swag under the wing, it's a fantastic weekend for a mini flyaway. See creedgrazing.com.au. It's their 25th anniversary in 2016, so have a think about sharing in the celebrations with them. You would be more than welcome.

Capricorn cruising

From The Old Station, we set the compass west, and followed the Capricorn Highway virtually all the way, overhead the wonderfully diverse farmland around regional centres like Blackwater, Emerald and Barcardine. The east-west railway line also follows this route, so navigation is stress free, even for me.

The new terminal at Emerald dishes up a very decent coffee, easy access to avgas, and a well-used boot cleaner at the front door. Yep, this is coal mining country, so there'll be no filthy boots coming onboard



“ ... you’ll find treasures galore once you step inside.”



ABOVE: Lofty ladies in waiting at Longreach airport.

LEFT: Thousands of acres of red dirt on our path are interrupted occasionally by a precious patch of green grass around a homestead.

BELOW: Meandering rivers and lush green landscape are the rewards for some nice low flying south of Cooktown. Croc-spotting competitions are mandatory.

these aerial services, thank you very much. From coal mining to cotton to citrus farms, the landscape is always changing and is hands-down the reason I so love touring this country of ours by air. It’s not all postcard stuff; indeed there are miles and miles where the land is bare, brown and dusty and for those lucky enough to have grass, it is a tiny cherished patch around their isolated homestead.

Testament to the quality of sunshine in the area, there are plans in place to install a massive 80,000 panel solar farm just outside Barcaldine. Lord knows all these regional towns crippled by the current drought would welcome new job opportunities and any economic stimulus they can get. And as they

head into their fourth failed wet season, I’m all for trying to get bums on seats to visit these outback towns and pour in some tourism dollars.

As far as a tourism attraction goes, I’m here to report that our destination today, Longreach, has absolutely nailed it. I hadn’t been for several years so I figured it was time for another visit. What a good idea that was.

Marinating in history

Even if good navigation is not your best suit, you’d be hard pressed to mistake Longreach airport for anywhere else. Up here in the middle of the Queensland outback, there are a couple of dead giveaways that you

can see for miles on approach.

The first thing you’ll see is a huge mother of a tail, in some familiar red and white livery, attached to one of several now-famous residents parked at the airport. With its 60 m wingspan, long-retired Boeing 747-200 jumbo jet VH-EBQ sits proudly alongside its little sister, Boeing 707 VH-XBA, Qantas’ first Boeing aircraft. These two old broads are arguably the leading act in the outdoor display but you’ll find treasures galore once you step inside. Welcome to the Qantas Founders Museum (qfom.com.au), custodian of some of the most significant Qantas aircraft ever built and a seriously outstanding collection of Australian aviation memorabilia.

You can take a guided tour through both of the jets, go for a wing walk on the 747 if you want, then take your time checking out the PBY Catalina and the DC-3 and do not miss the heritage-listed Qantas hangar where the de Havilland DH-50 and DH-61 are housed, along with their fascinating history.

In 1921 when it all began, the Qantas fleet consisted of two biplanes: an Avro 504K and a Royal Aircraft Factory BE2E. Two replicas of the Avro were constructed in 1985. One occupies centre stage in this museum; the other one is displayed in the Qantas domestic terminal at Mascot in Sydney.

You can spend hours here, easily, but save some time to wander across the

WardAir C172 takes off from the beautifully maintained airstrip at the Old Station.



Pearly Shores

As we go to print, I've been alerted to a new destination where the owners want me to pass on an invitation to touring pilots. The Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm is on the tip of the Dampier Peninsula, north of Broome. It's 50 miles from the famous Horizontal Waterfalls and 10 miles from Cape Leveque and it has its own airstrip. First one to try it – write and give me your impressions. See cygnetbaypearls.com.au

road to the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre. It's staggering to see such a brilliant exhibition out here in the middle of the outback.

Essentials

We stayed in town this time and found some great eateries on the main street: Harry's restaurant at the Longreach Motor Inn, CCD for a great curry and the Marino Bakery for everything you told yourself you were cutting down on during this trip. For once in my life, the pubs didn't do it for me, but that was the only disappointment. I located three in town, and found none of them the slightest bit appealing – no history, no charm, no original front bars. But that's OK, I'm told it's apparently not a vital ingredient to a successful stopover. Really?

As far as accommodation goes, there are a handful of places to stay across the road from the airport, which is great news for those of us without ground transport. The Jumbuck and the Albert Park Motor Inn are firm favourites with pilots, and now there's the new Kinnon & Co Outback Lodges, which I haven't

tried. And it seems everyone else but me has done and loved the sunset river cruise. Next time I go, I want three nights here, just to get it all covered.

If you decide to start planning a visit to Longreach, put the nearby towns of Charleville, Winton and Windorah on the list too. Pete, the refueller and cafe boss at Charleville airport, is definitely a man you're going to want to meet – arguably the most helpful and hospitable I've come across, so I give a big thumbs-up to calling in there for fuel, or else stay a day or two and have a look around. There's some pilot-friendly accommodation available near the airport with Graham and Deb Reid at charvillecaravanpark.com.au.

Well, that's it for another year of touring around this big old island of ours. Thanks for coming along for the ride and I hope I occasionally give you a little incentive to grab some friends and go see what the people and lifestyle are like in regional Australia. At the time of writing, Rossy and I are just back from a 24 day safari over to south-west WA with four other aircraft. So, Happy Christmas and see you next issue, when I'll share with you the first of a string of fantastic pilot-friendly destinations we found over there. 

The coastal flight southbound past Port Douglas and into Cairns needs to be on that bucket list.