

Western Stars

It takes a few more litres of avgas and some major planning, but the adventure and memories from a WA safari make it well worth the effort. Join **Shelley Ross** as she crosses the country from coast to coast.

It's on a roll, now! Rossy's found a great game to amuse himself. "Go on, catch that one. See how long it takes us to pass him." Tracking west along the Great Australian Bight, I peer down at the long straight ribbon of bitumen beneath us and spot a three-trailer road train rumbling westwards along the Eyre Highway. We'd just mucked around down at the coast attempting a creative photo shoot of the cliffs, but since the results were showing signs of dubious success, I was happy to move on.

"OK, I'll get him on a hill," I joked, as a million miles of perfectly flat Australia spreads out in front of us. As usual, my hired Cessna 182 from Curtis Aviation has settled into her task admirably and doesn't miss a beat as we tackle the robust headwind on our track today and the temperature outside climbs to a tropical 40°C in the shade.

It's when you're about 50 nm shy of Forrest Airport in the middle of the Nullarbor that the sheer expanse of this bare and featureless plain hits you square between the eyes. Horizon to

horizon, not a blade of grass or a bush in sight. To the south, the Southern Ocean offers an express route straight to Antarctica. In every other direction, welcome to a landscape Australia is really good at: hot, dry, endless desert. Personally, I love it.

Origins of the adventure

There have been rumblings over the years from our friends in Western Australia that they don't get much real estate on the pages of *Australian Flying* as a Bucket List haven. I straightaway remind them of the millions of keystrokes I've devoted to that show-pony of the north, Lady Kimberley. "Yeah, but how about us down south?" they say, "God's own country!"

To be fair, I'd never flown myself across to that celebrated south-west corner of WA, so I figured it might be time. I did some research on weather patterns over there and contacted some local pilots to get a feel for which month may be our best bet for decent weather for a safari. We decided on October, which ended

up being a great choice. We knew we were never going to avoid those Roaring Forties as we headed west past the Bight and around the southern coastline, but the upside of course is that it's usually all downhill on the way back.

It wasn't hard to get six air crews keen on another outback adventure, so several dozen emails and phone calls later, we had a chock-a-block 24 day safari organised. Compared to normal, we were late getting our act together for this trip and didn't end up confirming a lot of the accommodation til six months before departure.

We locked in the vital stopovers first, the ones with limited beds, then worked outwards from there. From the east coast, it's a fair old trek across to Perth when you look at the map, so the itinerary needed more days than our usual safaris, to cover the 4600 nautical miles.

We've also come to realize how important it is to try and stay two nights at our stopovers. This gives us a whole day out of the cockpit to recharge our bodies and our batteries and to have a good look around the area we're staying.

Safari route

We actually started this trip by all meeting at the Riverina town of Waikerie in SA, and spending our lay day here on the Murray. What a great idea that was, with James and Sandra of River Gum Cruises giving us a fantastic day on the water. Coming out of Camden

in south-west Sydney, I often stop at Mildura for fuel so that worked well this time en route to Waikerie. Bit of a bore having to go through full security to get to the kiosk in their new fancy pants terminal, but good internet coverage and a comfortable cafe area to have a coffee is worth it. By the way, the kiosk's phone number in the Nov 2015 ERSA is old; it's now 03 5055 0508. It's open every day, except on Saturdays after 12 noon.

Mildura can be a busy regional aerodrome, with Rex, Qantas and Virgin operating in and out of here. As I was landing, a light aircraft pilot who hadn't read the ERSA was happily doing a left-hand circuit on R27 which made for some interesting radio calls from the inbound Virgin crew. Seriously, it only takes a minute to glance at the Local Traffic Regulations in ERSA; it's not hard.

Our plan was to then cross the Nullarbor and follow the coast west, calling in for two nights each at Esperance, The Lily, Albany and Busselton before heading north on that fabulous coastal route past Perth on the way to our most distant destination on this safari, Dirk Hartog Island. Now there's a fantastic place to fly into and spend a few days terrifying the local fish – I'll get to that next issue.

Usually when we're on the home leg of any given safari, keeping each other awake on a dedicated chat frequency, we'll do a survey amongst all the crews as to their favourite

Approaching the Head of the Bight where fabulous sandy beaches give way to the dramatic cliffs of the bight.





“The Lily is one of the best stays I’ve had in 15 years of touring Oz.”

stopover this time. Everyone pretty much agreed there were several standouts: The Lily, Dirk Hartog Island, Wooleen Station, Forrest ... actually, there weren't really any dud destinations. The only place not all that comfortable was Ceduna which was stinking hot, blowing a gale, packed with tourists for the Annual Oyster Festival, and was on that weekend hosting a global symposium of flies, to which each delegate had brought a plus one. The attraction, of course, was avgas. When you gotta fill up, you gotta fill up.

Forrest

What a highlight of the trip this tiny dot on the map was. I'd highly recommend an overnight stop at Forrest, smack bang in the middle of the Nullarbor Plain. Not everyone would be cut out to take on the job of managing an airport and accommodation at such an isolated location but resident managers, Mark and Sandy Nash, have turned outback hospitality into an art form.

As you might guess as you're flying into it, the naming of Forrest was never about the trees. Forrest

LEFT: All is well with the world as we herald the sunset on the deck of the Dakota at the Lily Dutch Windmill.

BELOW: Waiting for the mail at Forrest.

was named after the explorer and first Premier of WA, Sir John Forrest. In fact, the place is marinating in history if you've got the time to give it. Given its isolation, those two massive strips of bitumen that form the Forrest runways are a very welcome sight ... not to mention the bowser. You can call in briefly for fuel if you like, but to be honest you'd have to be in a hell of a hurry not to take a load off here and spend the night. You'll be joining a long list of travellers who've been calling in here since 1929, when Sir Norman Brearley's West Australian Airways started hauling mail, passengers and freight from Perth to Adelaide and return.

Forrest is one of the last surviving railway townships on the ribbon of steel that is the Transcontinental Railway, stretching 1700 km from Kalgoorlie to Port Augusta. An average of 60 trains come through here each week, providing an essential service delivering vital supplies to keep the little community ticking over til the next drop. “If you hear a toot,” they say, “it may be the daily paper being thrown from the train or if it's Monday it's the Indian Pacific bringing our weekly shopping and mailbag from Kalgoorlie.”

The accommodation is unique. There are six really roomy and comfortable cottages which used to house the resident met workers many years ago and they're right at the airport. In fact, everything is near the airport at Forrest; blink and you'll miss it.

Sandy and Mark fed us beautifully on their verandah, shared loads of stories about their life here and took us out in the 4WDs to show us around their unique patch of WA. Some of us jumped on the funny old rusty bicycles lying around for a DIY tour of the “township”. You won't need a map. If you're wanting to get hold of the history, the old Bureau of Met building and museum are really worth a visit.

Westward Ho

The morning we left Forrest, there was a shocker of a westerly blowing. Half our crews stayed put, and the rest of us got airborne and settled in for the slow cruise across to Esperance, below the cloud cover at 4,500ft. Now, I live near Manly in Sydney and am pretty proud of our local beaches, but I am here to tell you I've never seen such stunning beaches as at Esperance, WA. Apart from the fact there's nobody there, (what bliss), the sand is pure white and feels like cornflour. That's apparently something you cook with. Anyway, it's beautiful and there are great day tours on offer here. We did the same in Albany,





ABOVE: Staying on board the restored Dakota at The Lily is a highlight for anyone with a love of aviation.

LEFT: Greens and browns are so last season. Pastel ponds en route Port Pirie to Ceduna.



using our day off here to visit nearby attractions like Denmark's incredible Elephant Rocks, and doing the popular Tree Top Walk in the Valley of the Giants.

The Lily Dutch Windmill

However, there was a little airstrip tucked into the foothills of the Stirling Ranges, just north of Albany that truly stole our hearts. I'd known about The Lily Dutch Windmill for many years, and have certainly heard great things from touring pilots who've stayed here. Now I do get enthusiastic about good places I find around the outback, but what I don't do is chuck these reviews out indiscriminately. The Lily is one of the best stays I've had in 15 years of touring Oz.

As with so many of these outback stays, it is the people you meet who create the memories. Your hosts at The Lily, Pleun and Hennie Hitzert, have created an

aviator's paradise you're never going to want to leave. A resourceful builder of staggering talent, Pleun personally constructed a fully operational five-storey traditional Dutch windmill on their property which turns out stone-ground spelt flour for sale to stores, bakeries and home users all over Australia. The magic that Hennie works with the precious flour, along with other local fresh ingredients, in her kitchen is beyond incredible. You'll get the picture at the evening meal during your stay at The Lily.

An experienced pilot himself and aircraft owner of many years, Pleun greatly enjoys the company of touring pilots and will happily show you through his immaculate hangar where his little Jabiru shares beautifully tiled floor space with his collection of vintage Volvos.

The accommodation here is another highlight, with room for between 15 and 19 people across all the cottages and the Dakota. Yes, I said the Dakota. You can sleep in a lovingly restored original 1944

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Dakota aircraft that really has to be seen to be believed. My tip is that you get in ahead of the rest of your mob and bags that for you and the bride, pronto. I'm serious; it could be the deal-maker to get her to finally come on tour with you. No, actually the deal maker is when she hears Pleun playing his tenor sax ... God, I love a quiet achiever.

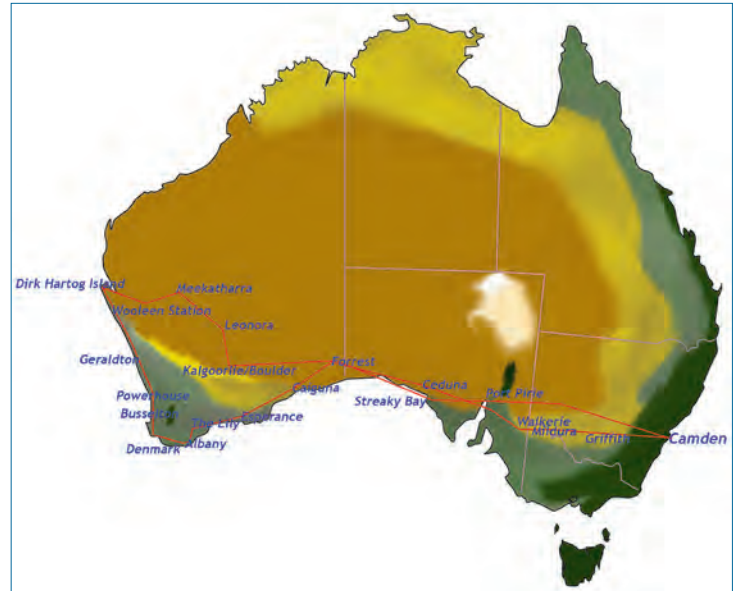
Start planning now!

So, get that flight planner out, or grab those WACs and start plotting. Use my route as a starting point if you like, throw in your own preferences, and take it from there. Watch the weather patterns over here – the south-west corner is a bit of a magnet for pesky frontal activity coming in off the ocean, and it could be luck of the draw. But as I said, we chose October and had two days of cloud out of 24. I think I'm a convert.

Before I leave you, here's a tip, call the guys at Busselton Aero Club. They fly to the conditions

all year round and are probably the friendliest bunch of aviators I've come across. Ken Manton and the team went out of their way to welcome us when we called in there, rallied their members around to give us all a lift to our accommodation and were on tap for any advice and storytelling we were up for during our stay. They're putting on what looks like being a fantastic Aerofest on Sunday 6 March. And since Busselton is the gateway to the Margaret River area, there aren't a whole lot of reasons why you wouldn't plan to hang up those headsets for a couple of nights and sample the local product.

Next issue, I'll bring you the second half of the safari. We're taking off from Busselton and heading up the coast through some controlled airspace past Perth, to discover our inner Robinson Crusoe on Australia's most westerly point: Dirk Hartog Island. I'll bring you home via the fabulous Wooleen Station and the quirky and impossibly remote old



goldmining towns of Leonora and Menzies. So nobody's allowed to say they don't have any ideas for using their licence this year – over the last few issues I've given you Tassie, Far North Qld, Riverina and WA. Pick one, and make it happen. Safe flying. 📍

ABOVE: Our safari route takes us around the highlights of southern Western Australia and back to Camden.

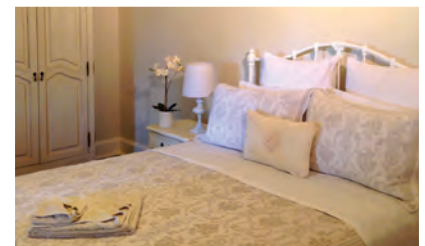


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Open for tourism 1st Apr to the 31st Oct. Full bird list available on Birdlife Australia and Wooleen Stations website.