

BREATHING IN THE SALTY EYRE

Hitting South Australia's lesser-trodden tracks, we find bush pubs, salt lakes and lone rangers... all in a long weekend

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For 10 years, Tom Noonan has been thrilling travellers on his various tours across Australia. This year, he added Lake Eyre, William Creek and Coober Pedy to his **Lake Eyre Tours** itinerary, making it a truly unique one that's perfect for families.

On our 560km journey from Adelaide up to Parachilna, a slideshow of wheat, barley and sunshine-yellow canola fields fills the minibus' supersized windows. At Magnetic Hill, Noonan stops the vehicle, nose up. "Right, everyone. If I take the handbrake off, will we roll backwards or forwards?" All 12 of us yell "Backwards!". Yet to our disbelief, the bus rolls uphill. "An optical illusion," he smiles. Who knows? But it certainly got everyone cackling.

Our journey past the towering ramparts of Wilpena Pound, dunes a-frenzy with shingleback lizards, and crumble our way through semi-flooded gorges. Noses press to windows as we finally pull into Parachilna's iconic **The Prairie Hotel** for the night.

Clambering out into a red and dusty world, we impatiently pile into the bar. Parachilna may only have a population of seven, but this quirky pub is heaving tonight. Feral food signs hang from doorways, Heysen Trail hikers swap stories over beers, motorcyclists talk engines,

working backpackers relax as station owners look on, and soon, we're all huddled around the outdoor fire on the starlit verandah.

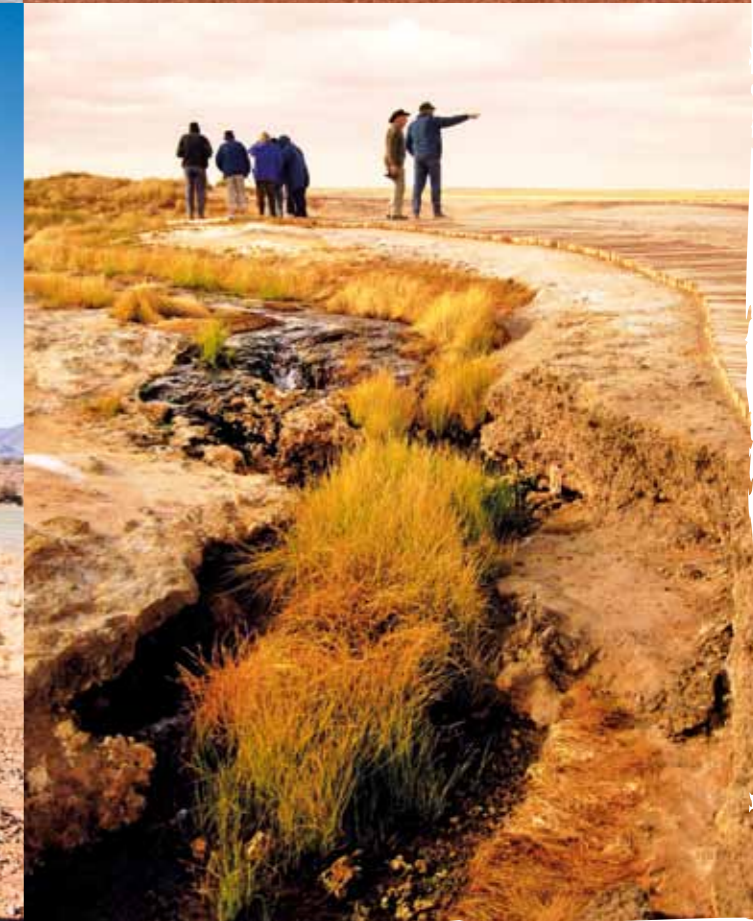
Dinner is devoured at a long table with Aboriginal artwork above our heads. The brave take on the famous "feral grill" of emu, kangaroo and camel, while the more timid stick to braised beef cheeks and butter chicken, followed by apple and quandong pies. The crackle of our bonfire eventually gives way to snoring.

After a peek at the Leigh Creek Coal mine, Noonan detours onto the Strzelecki Track near Lyndhurst, in search of one of Australia's weirdest sights. We arrive at a "Nissen hut", a semi-cylindrical corrugated-iron hut, home to Talc Alf. He's not in, but his solar- and wind-powered shanty showcases an outdoor gallery of hand-carved talc-stone sculptures.

"Come and ride his bike, Marie," calls Noonan. So on I climb and as I pedal, connecting fan belts and metal levers begin to agitate Talc Alf's handmade washing machine. It's a fantastic spectacle, with the machine aptly labelled: "WWW" (Weight Watchers Washing).

Further up the Oodnadatta Track, we discover Lyndhurst Ochre Quarry. This bowl of raspberry and vanilla ripple has been mined

Clockwise from above: Marie Barbieri; SAC/Adam Bruzzone; Don Fuchs



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Lake Hart's isolated salt pan; Tom Noonan pulls up at the Breakaways Reserve; the Oodnadatta track; Parachilna signboards

FROM TOP: The aerial view of Lake Eyre's northern watercourses; about to take off for Lake Eyre; after a long drive, The Prairie Hotel is a welcome sight

by the local Aboriginal people for millennia, its ochre used for medicines, painting and preservation, such as coating boomerangs.

Halfway between historic Marree and William Creek, Noonan abruptly veers to a halt. "Look, it's Klaus!" he shrieks. "Listen up, everyone. The first time I met this guy, I asked: 'How long you been on the road for?' And he said: "16 years!"

This eccentric German migrant, Klaus Menzel, had sought a bush-change after a construction career and broken marriage, and ill health. Swapping creature comforts for nomadic freedom, today he traverses Australia with Snowy and Willy, his two loyal camels, who pull his sawn-off wagon. Inside are a solar-powered computer and fridge.

The **William Creek Hotel** sits within the Anna Creek cattle station, the world's largest at 24,000km². Yet it's the corrugated iron and timber pub that we've come for.

"Sign the visitors' book, guys," orders the barman. And so we leave our mark — by pinning our business cards and hats to walls plastered with football shirts, Irish flags, bank notes and knickers.

It's 8am, and our **Wrightsair** plane bumps down a dirt runway heading for a salt sink the size of Holland. Red dunes and patches of green slowly dissolve into the salty shorelines of Lake Eyre. This awesome basin is Australia's driest area and at its lowest point is 15m below sea level. It has filled only three times in the past 150 years. Currently with 85% coverage and 45% full, its floodwater is 1.9m deep. When enough arrives, Lake Eyre turns tidal.

Flying north, we spot Cooper Creek, the lake's main inlet, where monsoonal rains have arrived from 1,100km away. It last flowed 20 years ago.

"In 1974, the lake filled to a depth of 6m, taking four years to retreat," our pilot says. "Even with no more rain, these waters will still linger until around March 2011."

We don't see the egrets, stilts, gulls and swans from up here as they feed off the buffet of food sources from the freshwater rivers that flow into the lake's north. But we all squeal like children upon spotting a flock of pelicans near the Warburton Groove. Beneath them, we see a smudged palette of pink brine-shrimp, brown clay-pans and red gibber-rock.

Back on dry sand, we trudge along the burnished-copper Oodnadatta Track for Coober Pedy, 1,060km north-west of Adelaide.

We then head down into the Desert Cave Hotel to meet owner Yanni Athanasiadis. "Most of our planet's opal is mined from Coober Pedy's 70 fields," he informs us, before demonstrating a cut and polish. After an underground mine tour, we put our credit cards to good use in the glittering opal store.



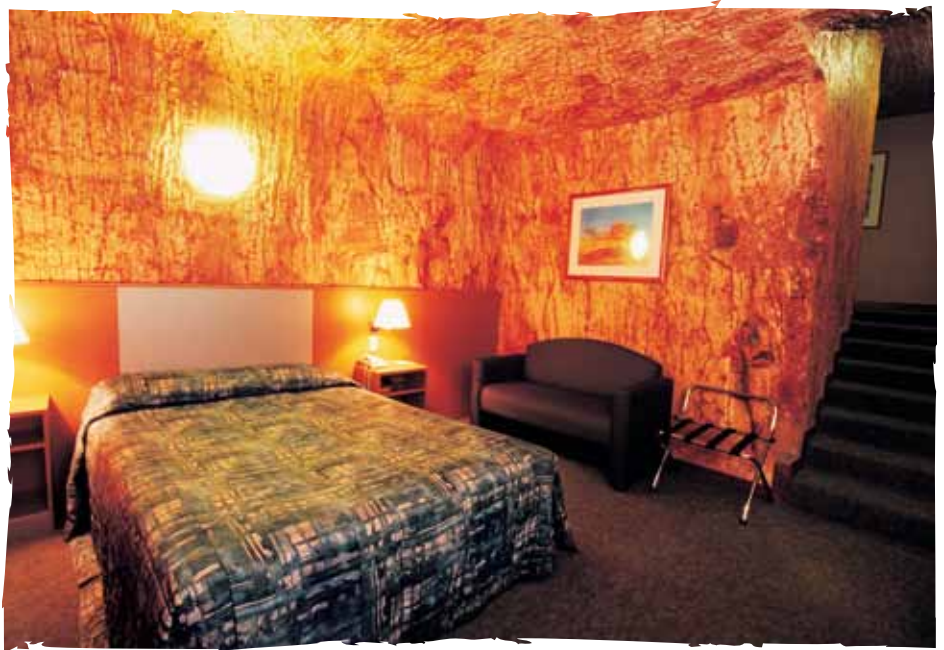
Lake Eyre's northern watercourses photo: FROSAT & Singing Bowl Media; Group shot and The Prairie Hotel photos: Marie Barbieri

An underground room in the Desert Cave Hotel

Take Me There

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William Creek,
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- 1 **WRIGHTSAIR**
William Creek,
tel: +61 (8) 8670 7962
- 1 **RADEKA'S UNDERGROUND MOTEL**
Coober Pedy,
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Driving alongside part of the world's longest dingo fence (5,300km long) leads us to the table-topped sandstone mesas of Breakaways Reserve. Humbled into silence, we absorb a stunning pastel-hued landscape of pinks, purples and oranges, aflame beneath the desert sunset. We contentedly burrow down into our dugout rooms at **Radeka's Underground Motel**.

Homeward-bound, we follow the desert pea-lined Stuart Highway. From the desert

plain, a halo of white illuminates the navy-blue sky. Noonan notices inquisitive eyes, and within minutes we're tramping down red sand dunes to a sweeping salty secret.

The salt-encrusted Lake Hart was partially filled just three weeks ago, and now it lies sparkling under the warm spring sun. The salt, still wet to the touch, crunches underfoot, encased in a necklace of khaki-green bushland. We all stand utterly spellbound in the timeless heart of South Australia. ★

Photo: SNTC/Peter Fisher

エア湖畔で深呼吸

長めの週末は、南オーストラリアへ。なじみのない道を行けば、荒野のパブや塩水湖、旅人が迎えてくれる。

これまでの10年間、トム・ノーマンはオーストラリア各地の一風変わった旅を紹介してきた。今年のルートもエア湖からウィリアム・クリーク、クーバーベディと、面白そうな予感がする。

アデレードからパラチルナまでは560km。小麦と大麦、そして黄金のキャンノーラ畑が続く。マグネティック・ヒルで、ノーマンはマイクロバスを停めた。バスは丘を登る形で止まり、乗客からざわめきもれる。ここに来るまでには、ウィルペナ・パウンドの高くそびえる城壁を過ぎ、半分水に浸りながら渓谷を渡った。そして、ようやくパラチルナの代表的なホテル、プレーリー・ホテルに到着だ。皆それぞれにバーへと向かい、星明かりで美しく照らされたベランダでたき火を囲んだ。夕食はこの名物、「野性味あふれるグリル」。エミューやカンガルー、ラクダのほか、牛のほほ肉、バターチキンがそろい、デザートはアップルパイと地元のビャクダン科の木の実を使ったパイ。

翌朝はまず、リー・クリークの炭坑跡をのぞきに行く。そしてノーマンはリンドハースト近くのスチュレッキ・トラックへと入り、オーストラリアでも特に一風変わった場所を目指して進む。やがて、「ニッセン・ハット」に到着。波上の鉄板におおわれた、半円筒形をした小屋だ。ここにはタルク・ア

ルフがいるはずだが、到着したときには不在だった。彼お手製の自転車にまたがり、一心にこぎ出すと、これもお手製の洗濯機が回り始める。

オードナダッタ・トラックへ。途中、リンドハーストのオーカー採石場がある。ここはアボリジニたちによって何百年もの間、採掘が続いた場所だ。採掘したオーカーは薬として、また、絵の具やブーメランの上塗り材としても用いられた。

歴史豊かなマーリーとウィリアム・クリークの間で、ノーマンが突然止まった。ちょっと風変わりなドイツ移民、クラウス・メンゼルを見かけたからだ。彼と会ったのは16年前で、その後、ずっと旅を続けているそうだ。メンゼルは建設業での仕事があまくいかず、離婚と病気を経験した後、新しい世界を探しているのだという。今は、忠実な二匹のラクダ、スノーウィーとウィリーとともにオーストラリア国内を旅している。

ウィリアム・クリーク・ホテルが建つアンナ・クリーク牧場は、世界最大規模の24,000km²の広さを誇る。波形の鉄板と木材で作られたパブで楽しい時間を過ごす。

朝8時。ライツエアーの飛行機に乗って、オランダを飲み込む広さがあるという塩水湖へとむかう。赤茶けた砂丘とまだらに見える緑の場所を

すぎてしばらく進むと、塩水湖、エア湖の海岸線が見え始めた。

ここは、オーストラリアで最も乾燥した地域であるとともに、最も低い土地でもある。この海抜は、海面下15mだ。それでも、水没したのは150年の歴史の中でわずか3回だけ。

北へ進路をとると、クーバー・クリークの本流が見えてくる。この川が氾濫したのは、もう20年前のことだ。見物をすませ、銅色に輝くオードナダッタ・トラックをクーバーベディへとむかう。

世界最長のディンゴ用フェンス（全長5,300km）を横目に見ながら車は走り、ハンブルドのブレイクアウェイズ・リザーブにある平らな頂上の砂岩の山に到着した。砂漠の夕日が放つ、ピンク、紫、そしてオレンジの色彩の美しさを、ただ息を潜めて見つめるしかなかった。

スチュワート・ハイウェイの道は、家へとつながっている。赤茶けた砂丘と、塩水湖の様子に思いを巡らせる。塩の結晶におおわれていたハート湖は、三週間ほど前にごく一部が水に沈んだという。今は、春の暖かい日射しを浴びて、きらきらと輝いているだろう。表面の塩の結晶は、まだ、湿っているに違いない。南オーストラリアに広がる悠久の自然は、私たちの心をとらえて放さない。