

BIRD'S EYE OF THE OUTBACK

JEREMY DRAKE COVERS FOUR STATES IN A 'TASTE OF THE OUTBACK' CHARTER TOUR THAT PROVES TO BE MORE OF A SMORGASBORD.



With the sun on my face, I close my eyes and step off the steep embankment, careful to navigate the rotted roots of a fallen Coolabah. It isn't until I hear the first scrunch of salt and dry mud beneath my boots I actually believe I am here, and crouch to run my hand along the ground, touching my finger to my tongue just to make sure.

At 15 metres below sea level, life on the southern part of Lake Eyre in South Australia is non-existent, but that doesn't make being here any less magical. The horizon stretches for kilometres in both directions and all I see are the ripples of heat as the western sun warms a dry, acid-white lakebed in front of me.

Less than an hour earlier we had flown over an unusually full northern section of the lake, very different to where we are now standing. To get here, our eight-seater luxury King Air Beechcraft charter plane had tracked over the Goyder Lagoon at 2500 feet. We all watched in awe as thousands of litres of flood water poured so ferociously into the northern channel of the lake you could see the white caps of an almost horizontal waterfall.

CALLING INTO THE CATTLE STATION

We land a few minutes later at a private airstrip on Muloorina Cattle Station where I meet the landowner Cindy Mitchell. Cindy is a generational pastoralist who, along with husband Trevor, has roots in this part of Australia that date back nearly a century. While everything north of Muloorina is benefiting from once-in-a-decade floodwaters, it's been a dry few years for Cindy, whose once thriving herd of more than 5000 cattle has dropped to just 1500. The 46 millimetres of rain since 2015 is barely enough to fill a cup of tea. "I'm predicting rain in 2022," Cindy tells us from her Lake Eyre lookout of Prescott Point, reserved exclusively for the visiting guests of Kirkhope Aviation who operate this luxury four-day air tour of the outback. Her effervescent smile masks the obvious struggle of life on this land.

The last time Lake Eyre had this much water flowing into its northern section was in 2009, and as it fills again Cindy is busy coping with the steady flow of tourists at her camping site.

Above: When it fills, Lake Eyre is the largest salt lake in Australia. Right: The southern part of Lake Eyre where life is non-existent. Photo: Jeremy Drake.

When in flood (this happens roughly every 10 to 15 years) the lake sits as a crowning jewel in the great Australian winter outback adventure. Some drive for days to get here, but it's well known that the lake's true beauty only reveals itself from above. From our low altitude flight between Birdsville and Cindy's property in Muloorina, we see kilometres of emerald grassy plains as we crisscross our way down the flooded Diamantina and Warburton Creek. Our pilot, Keith Siler, banks our plane left and right and my fellow passengers gasp at the

contrasting landscape in the larger-than-average viewing windows. Green tributaries birdlife full on one side, and harsh, red dunes the other. The braided channels of the two rivers below tentacle out into tiny tributaries like veins and arteries in a dissected human body.

When Lake Eyre finally comes into view, columns of dust rise above the brilliant hues of pink, cream, faun and grey. This is easily Australia's biggest watercolour painting covering an enormous 9500 square kilometres.

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Photos: Keith Slev and Jeremy Drake.



HERALDING HISTORY

During Kirkhope's signature 'Taste of The Outback' tour we cover almost 3500 kilometres of terrain, and to call it just a 'taste' would be undercooking what is a smörgåsbord of layer upon layer of different outback experiences.

On this luxury tailored charter we're traversing great swathes of land, and at the end of each day I'm amazed as our pilot-cum-guide effortlessly drops our plane onto dusty landing strips barely large enough to park a truck, then introduces us to local publicans like they're his long lost friends. As we step off the plane at Innamincka, local Geoff Hodgson raises the fly net hanging from his Akubra like it's an obligatory outback salute. Geoff's community of just 45 people is the closest settlement to the resting place of great explorers Robert Burke and William Wills along the Cooper Creek. Within 30 minutes, Geoff is walking our group to Burke's original grave, and beneath the shade of a century-old Coolabah tree we marvel in his thick Australian drawl and

captivating storytelling before our landing gear is up once again.

Back in the comfort of the King Air and en route to Birdsville, my mind wanders to Burke and Wills. The land and dunes below look like hundreds of folds in a morning bed sheet, but to them it must have felt like they were crossing endless mountains.

In Birdsville, guide Graeme Miller takes us to the top of Big Red, the 40 metre-high sand dune famous in these parts (and beyond) that marks the unofficial setting-off point for a Simpson Desert crossing.

"Our desert isn't just some big sand dune you see in pictures of the Sahara," he says. "There's a new generation that's rediscovering central Australia. It's finally cool again to wear an Akubra and bring your kids into the bush for a luxury holiday."

A handful of other tourists sit nearby in the sand, squinting into the setting sun. Along with my fellow passengers, I recline in a deck chair and sip on chilled champagne while the fading light changes the colour of the dune to a fiery red.

Above and below left:
The dramatic landscape of
'Big Red', the name given to
a sand dune on the edge
of the Simpson Desert.



UPGRADE



HOMEWARD BOUND

In Broken Hill we visit Browne's Shaft that rises steeply out of the ground as a rusted reminder of that this town was built on mining in 1883. But it was also home to legendary Australian artist Pro Hart and you need only wander the streets filled with modern murals or the halls of the famous Palace Hotel to witness a city that has clearly evolved into an artistic and cultural beacon in the heart the Australian outback.

We end our charter at the beginning of time. Our plane descends into the craggy, ancient landscape of the Flinders Ranges, and our guide stops to examine a 600 million-year-old fossil from the ancient sea floor that once covered this part of South Australia, and time, for now, seems immaterial.

Above: The Palace Hotel in Broken Hill, famously featured in the movie, 'Priscilla Queen of the Desert'. Left: The ancient Flinders Ranges in outback South Australia.

▶ GETTING ON BOARD

Kirkhope Aviation runs air charter tours year round. Kirkhope's Taste of The Outback tour is roughly A\$4,595 per person, twin share. Prices include accommodation, meals, tours, guides and activities.

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— J&D McCONAGHY - 1 July 2019

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