



Main: the natural amphitheatre of Wilpena Pound. Left: the rich colours of the outback near Broken Hill in New South Wales

BIG SKIES

outback by air

The epic landscape of Australia's outback has long been a lure for travellers with a taste for adventure. The prospect of a great outback trek is made more alluring and, crucially, more accessible with the emergence of tailored air tours. By Claire Scobie



Kate Winslet slept in room 11; Harvey Keitel across the corridor. Following *Patriot Games*, Philip Noyce filmed *Rabbit Proof Fence* on location at the Prairie Hotel in South Australia. A dot on the burnished red desert, this iconic pub attracts plenty of international filmmakers. But for most Europeans on a three-week holiday 'Down Under', the pub is a bit out of the way... unless, you travel with Big Blue Air Touring, which makes even the most remote destination accessible.

This Australian air tour operator offers a range of exclusive 'explorer itineraries' for those who want to 'see the real interior and meet the real Aussies,' says Big Blue co-director Pat Kent. I joined their inaugural four-day 'Flavours of the Outback' trip, which promises contrasting styles of outback accommodation, scenery and gourmet food across Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. For this tour, British chef, Richard McGeown, who trained under three of UK's finest chefs – Marco Pierre White, Gordon Ramsay and Raymond Blanc – has developed three signature menus to showcase the best local produce from each region.

The journey began at Moorabbin airport, south east Melbourne, when we took off in a refurbished Piper Chieftain ten-seater. Big Blue co-director and pilot, Peter Sherlock, flies at some 5000ft, affording spectacular views of the landscape, while Kent provides a running commentary. Both are impeccable hosts. After a fine lunch at 27 Deakin Street, owned by leading Australian chef, Stefano De Pieri, in Mildura, Victoria's food bowl, we touched down for the night at Kars Station, 60km from Broken Hill in New South Wales.

If the first night's accommodation in converted sheep shearing quarters is somewhat functional, the warm welcome from fifth-generation station owner, Fred Hughes, on his red dirt airstrip, makes up for it. (If more luxury is required, Kars does have one ensuite double room.) Hughes, 34, runs his sheep and cattle station single-handedly which, at some 150,000 acres (the size of Singapore), is quite a feat. »

OUTBACK *Experience*

Accompanied by a fiery sunset – a true sign that you’ve arrived in the outback – we toured the farm buildings steeped in Australian history. In one shed, store books dating back to 1870 (when Kars was established) gathered dust alongside ancient Aboriginal arrow flints. Dinner was a delicious deluxe barbecue on the homestead’s terrace under a vast pointillist canvas of stars, and as I crept to bed that night it was hard to believe I had breakfasted that morning in Melbourne. At Kars the silence is so thick it cradles you into a deep, dreamless sleep.

En route to South Australia the following day, we stopped to refuel at Broken Hill and visited the Royal Flying Doctor’s Museum. From there it is a half-hour flight to Parachilna, home to a population of seven and the Prairie Hotel. Owned by the genial Ross and Jane Fargher, this bush pub combines stylish, eco-aware rooms – partially sunk below ground level to keep cool in summer – with genuine charm. I plumped for room 11, where Kate Winslet stayed when filming *Holy Smoke*, with a view onto the rugged Flinders Ranges.

A yellow road sign alerts you to ‘Feral Grazing Ahead’ and at the Prairie the focal point is the bar, frequented by locals in broad-brimmed Akubra hats. The hotel specialises in native cuisine: kangaroo burgers, emu patties and camel sausages. Despite initial reservations, I was won over by McGeown’s inspired five-course menu, which included emu parfait, slices of roo fillet in red wine jus



The old Baker's House, Kars



Sheep stations cover the outback



Peter Sherlock and co-pilot Tori



Checking into the Prairie Hotel

and, for dessert, a quandong (bush plum) tart. After such an exotic feast country singer John O’Dea entertained the crowd, before a bunch of singing sheep shearers took over.

Next day, the Chieftain banked low over Wilpena Pound, a natural amphitheatre in the Flinders, before travelling some 400km south to Portee Station on the River Murray for our last night. Ian Clark still runs this elegant 1873 homestead, with sloping lawns down to a grey-green creek, as a commercial sheep station. The afternoon was spent touring the Barossa wine region, before sundowners on the veranda and a roasted Portee Station lamb with root vegetables.

It was a wrench to leave the next day when Clark dropped us in his converted rocket launcher on the paddock airstrip. But one hour later, a black stretch limousine in Warrnambool, on Victoria’s south west coast, met us for a final seafood lunch at Pippies by the Bay restaurant. As the late afternoon light illuminated the Twelve Apostles, like stacks of glimmering gold, we flew back to Melbourne following the Great Ocean Road. It was a triumphant close to our outback odyssey and when I stepped off the plane at Hangar 6 I felt as if I’d been away twice as long. This tour should come with a warning: it stretches time... and waistbands!

www.australia.com

The ‘Flavours of the Outback’ tour costs from £4,905 per person for two adults sharing. Four-day tour price includes accommodation, meals and beverages, flights, hotel transfers and ground tours. FOR MORE INFORMATION, or to make a booking, call your American Express Travel Service.

A CHANCE TO *dream*



Drawing on 40,000 years of local artistic tradition

Two years ago, after days of hot dusty driving, I was lucky enough to meet some of the Aboriginal artists from Balgo in the Tanami desert, Western Australia. A riot of colour filled the cultural centre; the artists, many internationally acclaimed, were keen to show their work. Suddenly, the room fell silent, as one Warlayirti elder began to sing the story of his painting and as he did so, captured the spirit of Australia itself. I will never forget it.

It is a rare privilege to meet such fine artists,

but one now offered by Big Blue with their six-day Dreamtime Art itinerary from Alice Springs to Darwin, via the remote communities of Yuendumu, Turkey Creek and Balgo. Art expert, Sophie Ullin, hosts the tour, which includes flying over the Bungle Bungles in WA’s Kimberley Region. This trip, in the comfort of your own plane, is a chance of a lifetime.

‘Dreamtime Art’ five-night/six-day tour costs from

£7,439 per person for two adults sharing, including all flights, accommodation, meal and hotel transfers.

For more information, or to make a booking, call your American Express Travel Service.

www.bigblueairtouring.com



Australian indigenous art is highly collectable