

The 11.55 train to Sydney: four days, 2,700 miles... and one unlucky camel

Tom Chesshyre rattles right across Australia in one astonishing – and luxurious – rail journey



THE RED PLANET: The 1,860ft Indian Pacific crosses the Nullarbor Plain. Above: The train's gold-class dining carriage and, right, a vast gold mine in Kalgoorlie



LUXURY: Enjoying the view from a platinum-class cabin. Kangaroos, inset below, are usually smart enough to stay out of the train's way left, dotted along the route

GETTING THERE
Great Southern Rail (greatsouthernrail.com.au) offers Indian Pacific rides from Perth to Sydney from about £520 in red class, £880 in gold class and £1,976 in platinum class. Etihad (etihad.com, 0345 608 1225) offers flights from Heathrow, Manchester and Edinburgh to Australia. Fares to Perth and returning from Sydney start from £650.

IT'S A sun-drenched morning at the East Perth Terminal and the Indian Pacific train gleams brightly beyond the cool, long shadows of the station. Two dozen stainless-steel carriages stretch along the boomerang-shaped platform, while light plays on ridges of steel and the indented panels of the transcontinental train.

Our coaches, dating from the late 1960s and early 1970s, were built in New South Wales by Commonwealth Engineering, which received a licence for the sleek, bullet-like design from Budd, a metal fabricating company based in Philadelphia.

I know this because John Brinkley, one of three train managers on the 1,860ft-long Indian Pacific (so named as it travels from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean), is on hand to answer any questions. He also points guests towards their carriage for our 2,700-mile journey. We are departing Perth on a Sunday at 11.55am, and are due to arrive in Sydney on Wednesday at 11.07am.

I am travelling in gold class for two nights (sleeping cabins and a lounge with free drinks, plus free meals in a smart dining carriage) followed by a night in red (reclining seats and a cafe where you have to pay). There is also platinum class – comfortable cabins with double beds, a swanky dining carriage, and a free cocktail bar.

It's not often that you find train managers who are quite so well informed. Brinkley also tells me that the train hit a camel on the way from Sydney to Perth a couple of days ago. "There was damage to the loco – we had to repair an air pipe. We blow animal whistles and the horn, but it still happens. Kangaroos keep out of the way generally. Kangaroos are pretty smart."

TRAINS are a great way of getting from A to B and seeing shifting landscapes through the window, but classic trains on classic journeys seem to take on a life of their own – almost as though they're miniature moving worlds. The Indian Pacific is no exception. As we roll out of the Perth suburbs and into the parched countryside with gum trees, shrubs and orange-tinged soil, the world within the Indian Pacific begins to reveal itself.

After dumping my bag in my cabin, which also contains a pull-down sink and a radio, I go to the gold-class lounge to meet my fellow travellers. Many of them are sitting in burgundy leather armchairs and banquettes drinking Crown Lager and glasses of Australian wine, while the topics of conversation range from Chinese investment in Hunter Valley coal mines, the size of sheep stations, the quality of the train's gin (deemed top-notch), and the merits of the gold-mining city of Kalgoorlie, our first stop.

"The city's got all the same mod-

erns as Perth, it's just further from the beach," said Dave, a retired civil servant from Canberra.

It is a jolly train. Meals are substantial: three courses with steaks and fish offered as mains, served in booths separated by frosted-glass partitions. Some of the diners, however, are rather substantial themselves and are too big to fit in the booths, so they eat in the lounge.

We stop at Kalgoorlie (population: 31,000) at 10.45pm. Coaches take us past darkened sights including a vast working mine; gold was first discovered here in 1893.

Evocative wooden buildings from the turn of the 20th Century give the centre a frontier feel. A guide points out a Woolworths that has the biggest takings in Australia (the gold

miners have plenty of cash to spend), as well as a brothel that seems to have become a tourist attraction.

I find sleeping in the compartments is easy, enjoying the rhythm as we head along the tracks, and wake in the morning to see indigo and copper-gold light illuminating wispy clouds above gum trees and the dried-out river beds.

By mid-morning, the Indian Pacific draws to a halt at Cook (population: four) and I

spot a sign saying: 'If you're crook, come to Cook, Queen City of the Nullarbor.'

Crook, of course, is slang for 'ill' in Australia, while the Nullarbor Plain is a region that boasts a wild and rugged landscape. A 297-mile section of track running through it is the world's longest straight stretch – and Cook is a tiny outpost, now with mainly rundown buildings and dusty yards. However, it is a good place to stretch our legs.

Early the next morning we pull into Adelaide, and most of the passengers join coach tours of the South Australian city. We are taken to Mount Lofty at one side of the city, though it's shrouded in cloud. Back

in town, it's fascinating to see the Adelaide Oval, where there is a statue of Australian cricket legend Sir Don Bradman.

AFTERWARDS we linger in Adelaide Parklands Terminal, where I buy a battery-powered beer-bottle cooler that makes train sounds when it's lifted – it is also decorated with the Indian Pacific's wing-tipped eagle logo. Life is surely not complete without one.

Now I have switch to red class, which is located towards the front of the train. It comprises 48 seats that look as though they belong in the business-class section of a plane, except they're filled with backpackers and

retirees who have spread out as comfortably as possible.

Our red-class duty manager advises us not to spend too much time in the adjoining buffet/cafe car – called Matilda's – if we are not buying anything, and then recommends the breakfasts that he personally cooks. I've had phone calls from Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver saying, "I've heard about your breakfasts." I reply, "No. I can't come to work for you. I want the twenty bucks an hour that Great Southern Rail is paying me."

Not far out of Adelaide, I catch a glimpse of my first and only kangaroos. They're far in the distance and look like fox-coloured traffic cones. I also spot an eagle high above us.

That evening we reach Broken Hill, a lead and zinc mining town, and I make my way to the Palace Hotel. The venue featured heavily in the 1994 film The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert, which is all about the unlikely subject of drag queens in the Outback.

Not quite sure what to expect, I walk through the doors rather hesitantly and discover a reception area with bright murals, mounted stuffed birds and cabinets displaying leopard-print high heels. On the wall is an advert for the Broken Hill Festival. Its motto? 'Life in the Outback is never a drag.'

Back on the train, we clatter through the night and wake to see cows munching grass in the foot-

hills of the Blue Mountains. I eat our carriage manager's Gordon Ramsay-quality breakfast and then sit back as we snake into Sydney's Grand Central station. We're a mere 13 minutes late – not bad when you've just covered 2,700 miles.

You may be tempted by Australia's Ghan train from Adelaide to Darwin but to feel the full size of Australia, from ocean to shiny ocean, there is only one train. So book a ticket on the Indian Pacific, grab a window seat, order a chilled glass of chardonnay, and enjoy the ride.

● Tom Chesshyre's book *Ticket To Ride: Around The World On 49 Unusual Train Journeys* is published by Summersdale.

Crepes and a jug of cider with my pensioner-chic Parisian

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did I. Veronika's tour is full of interesting little snippets you won't find in any guidebook. She even takes me to see a lifesize replica of Liberty's torch, positioned at the entrance to the underpass in which Princess Diana died.

We pause again in the courtyard of the Louvre, where Veronika recounts the tale of a man who stole the Mona Lisa (Vincenzo Peruggia visited the museum in the summer of 1911, unhooked his favourite painting and took it home with him. It was not recovered for two years).

Her tour takes three hours and is a fabulous introduction to the city. It's also the perfect appetite-

builder for my next hosted tour. Jeanne, a quintessential pensioner-chic Parisian, has promised to whisk me off to lunch at her favourite creperie, Breizh Cafe, in the heart of the Marais district.

"It's my guilty pleasure," she says, "and I'm sure you'll love it too."

We've hardly sat down before Jeanne is ordering a large jug of cider and two traditional crepes made with ham, eggs and Reblochon mountain cheese. "Never go for the new-fangled ones," she advises. "The classics are the best."

The beauty of hosted tours is that you get to know the city's inhabitants at the same time as the city itself. After draining our cider, Jeanne spills all the local gossip as she leads me through the

GETTING THERE

Eurostar (eurostar.com) offers one-way fares from London to Paris from £29. For more information, visit trip4real.com and airbnb.com. The apartment Giles rented in the Marais costs from £250 per night. Visit airbnb.co.uk/rooms/6739175.

backstreets of the Marais, dipping into her favourite chocolate shops, macaroon bars and the galleries of the Place des Vosges.

After snatching a final coffee, I'm off to meet Alexandre, a French-Canadian sommelier who's recently signed up as a host on Trip4Real. His tour is more formal

than the others – a tasting in a proper wine shop – but it's no less informative for that.

"When you leave this place in an hour or so," he says, "you'll know more about wine than 80 per cent of French people."

As he speaks, he eases the cork from a bottle and pours a glass of Burgundian chardonnay.

"So many people say they hate chardonnay because they don't like the oaky taste of the Australian ones," he says. "But this is how we drink chardonnay."

Alexandre is friendly, knowledgeable and entertaining: the perfect host for an aperitif. For dinner itself, I've arranged to meet another Alexandre – a sports-teacher-cum-

photographer, who offers tours around the Montmartre district, followed (if you choose) by dinner at his favourite restaurant, Cafe Philippe in the Marais.

This is about as local as it gets – a neighbourhood restaurant packed with Parisians and not a single tourist in sight. We share a selection of starters – salads and home-cooked pâté – before moving on to a hearty veal stew.

You don't have to sign up to Trip4Real to meet genuine Parisians. Some Airbnb hosts will also take you to their favourite spots. The following morning I meet Charley, who rents out his apartment close to the Canal St Martin. He takes me for

brunch at La Rotonde on the waterfront. "Some people rent out their apartment and never get to see their guests," he says. "But I like to meet them, show them around, get to know them. I've made some good friends over the past year."

If you're fortunate, you'll find yourself being looked after by an Airbnb host like Charley. If you're not, then Trip4Real is an excellent way to see Paris through the eyes of a Parisian.

By the end of the weekend – if all goes well – you'll be eating raw garlic and wearing a string of onions around your neck. Except they don't seem to do that in France. At least, not in Paris.



EFFORTLESSLY STYLISH: Giles's host took him to the Place des Vosges

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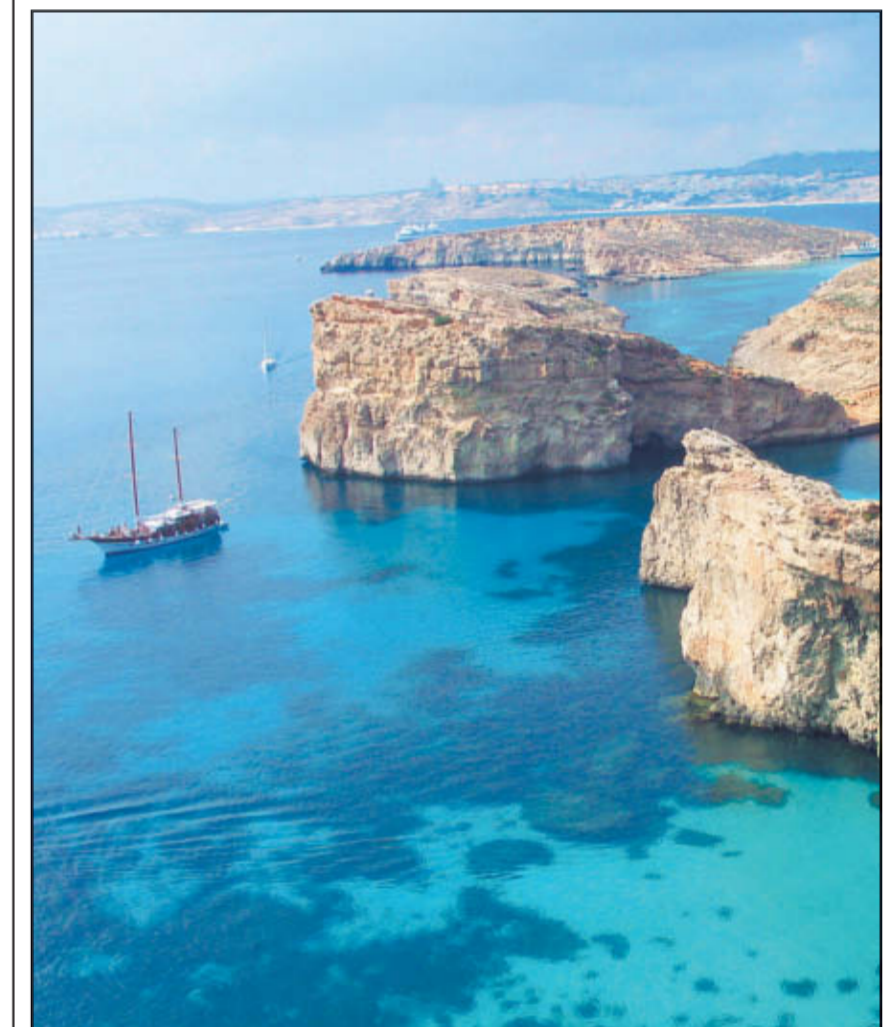
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