

LET'S WING IT

Why drive pub to pub when you can fly instead, joined by a world-famous cricketer? A unique outback pub crawl visits 10 iconic pubs in three states.

WORDS BY SUSAN ELLIOTT

I feel like a celebrity. I've parked inside a hangar at the airport and rolled my suitcase 20 metres to a luxury-appointed Cessna Grand Caravan – my private aircraft for the next 10 days. There's no check-in, no boarding card, no security screening, no missing bags and no delay. I'm trying to not look smug.

My eight fellow passengers seem equally thrilled. Sinking into sheepskin seats, we taxi for take-off with Outback By Air, one of many Australian charter-flight companies flying high – as they did when major city terminals were lockdown ghost towns and again now, as travellers want to fly but are airport shy. Our flight from Sydney's Bankstown Airport is arguably the most popular charter flight in Australia. Four words say it – Classic Outback Pub Crawl. In five days, we'll visit 10 iconic Australian pubs in three states and fly more than 4,000km.

"Why drive pub-to-pub when you can fly?" asks Phil Hines rhetorically. Hines is one of the company's three pilots and business partner with his mate, Glenn McGrath. Yes, the former Test cricketer and the most prolific fast bowler in Australian cricket history.

"We're going to see more in five days than we could in weeks by road," says McGrath. "And the redder the dirt gets, the happier I am."

The clutter of suburban roofs yield to the grey-green bush of the Blue Mountains, which falls away to the patchwork pastures of the Central West. Greens turn gold then, like a child's painting, the landscape becomes a squiggly blur of oranges, reds, blacks and browns. It looks unreal.

Flying slow and low at 5,500 feet, I get it. I feel no envy for motorists driving the long, dead straight roads below, nor the commercial flights leaving contrails at 37,000 feet. It's a Goldilocks moment ... this flight is 'just right'. We land in Bourke to refuel the aircraft and quench our own thirst at the Port of Bourke Hotel. Pub number one.

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

How does a 'Feral Mixed Grill' sound? Flying is adventurous, but wait until your tastebuds land on camel boerewors, kangaroo fillet, emu mignon and goat chops with a saltbush jus! They're all on the menu at The Prairie Hotel in Parachilna, 500km north of Adelaide, an overnight stop for Australian Air Safaris' 'Taste of the Outback' tour, which covers four states in four days and includes the likes of Mungo National Park, Broken Hill, Birdsville and the Flinders Ranges.

At Australia's Top End, Abercrombie & Kent's Cessna Caravan 210 parks on a private strip at Bamurru Plains, a luxury resort bordering Kakadu National Park. Guests are soon 'airborne' again – on an airboat safari across floodplains, through Melaleuca forests, past herds of wallowing buffalo, wading brolga and basking crocodiles. Sea eagles are sky-high chaperones and blue skies turn black as thousands of magpie geese take flight for their sunset sweep of the waterway.

In Western Australia, Captain's Choice passengers fly into the heart of the Kimberley on a 24-seat Fokker F70. It's a right royal trip; the jet once flew the Dutch royal family around Europe with the king himself the pilot.

IT'S YOUR ROUND

Meanwhile, I feel like royalty as our Caravan lands mere metres from the Birdsville Hotel – the iconic Queensland pub on the edge of the Simpson Desert. Nowhere else in Australia can you park a plane 50m from a pub door. A beer on the veranda is topped only by sunset drinks on the Simpson Desert's largest sand dune, Big Red. It's magical. "Lamb shanks, every time!" shouts McGrath. "I didn't even have to look because it's on all the best outback menus."

Later we're at William Creek Hotel. Driving from Birdsville would have taken 12 hours: we flew it in less than two, and doubled the town's population of 10.

We love its nickname 'Bill Rivers'. We love the lone parking meter on the edge of the Oodnadatta Track, the dilapidated LandCruiser advertising 'William Creek Driving School: First Lesson Free' and Australia's first solar-powered public telephone, just standing by hoping someone will make a call. A bush cemetery has memorials furnished with spanners and spades and inside the pub there's a blast of colour with caps, cards, photos, hats, bras and banknotes from around the world. Find a centimetre to sketch your initials while you wait for your lamb shanks.

"I love this place," says McGrath. "It's Australia's most remote pub, surrounded by Anna Creek, the world's largest working cattle station. I'm miles from home, but love it here."

The outback has been loved for a long time. But it's taken a pandemic to remind travellers that flying Australia is above and beyond any overseas experience. And now I'm back, wheeling my suitcase to the hangar, trying not to look too smug.

COME FLY WITH ME

Cricket legend Glenn McGrath (left) has partnered with Cootamundra pilot Phil Hines to operate Outback By Air. McGrath is a guest on many of the tours. A country boy from the Dubbo-Narromine region of NSW, not many know McGrath loves flying almost as much as cricket.
outbackbyair.com.au

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> GLENN MCGRATH











Clockwise from opposite page, far left: Outback by Air's Cessna Grand Caravan; Glenn McGrath feeding the emus at Mungo Lodge, Arumpo, NSW; An airboat safari at Bamurru Plains safari lodge, NT; William Creek Hotel on the Oodnadatta Track, SA; The legendary Birdsville Hotel in Queensland; Sunset in outback NSW.

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